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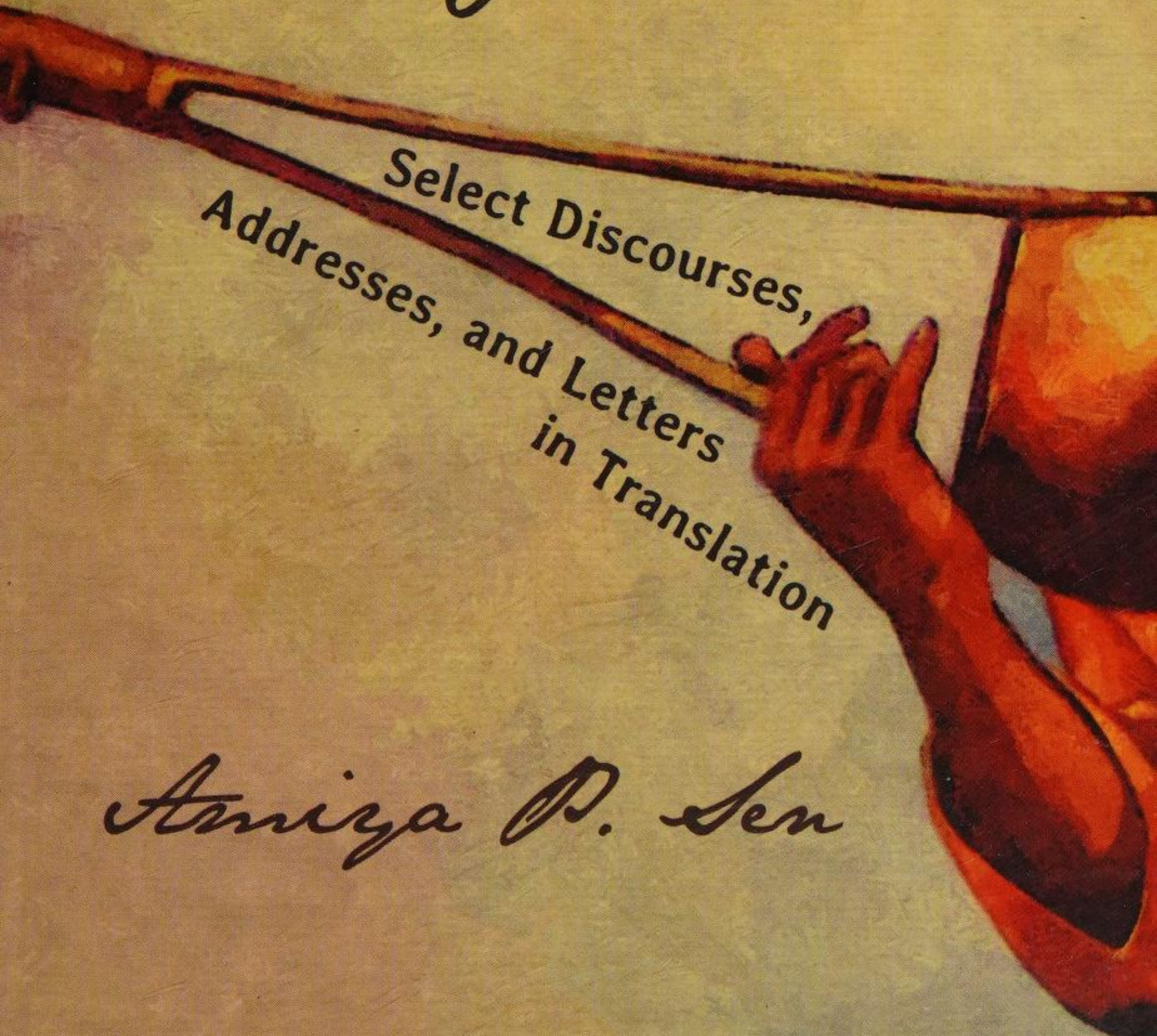
Religion and Rabindranath Tagore

Select Discourses, Addresses, and Letters in Translation



Amiya P. Sen

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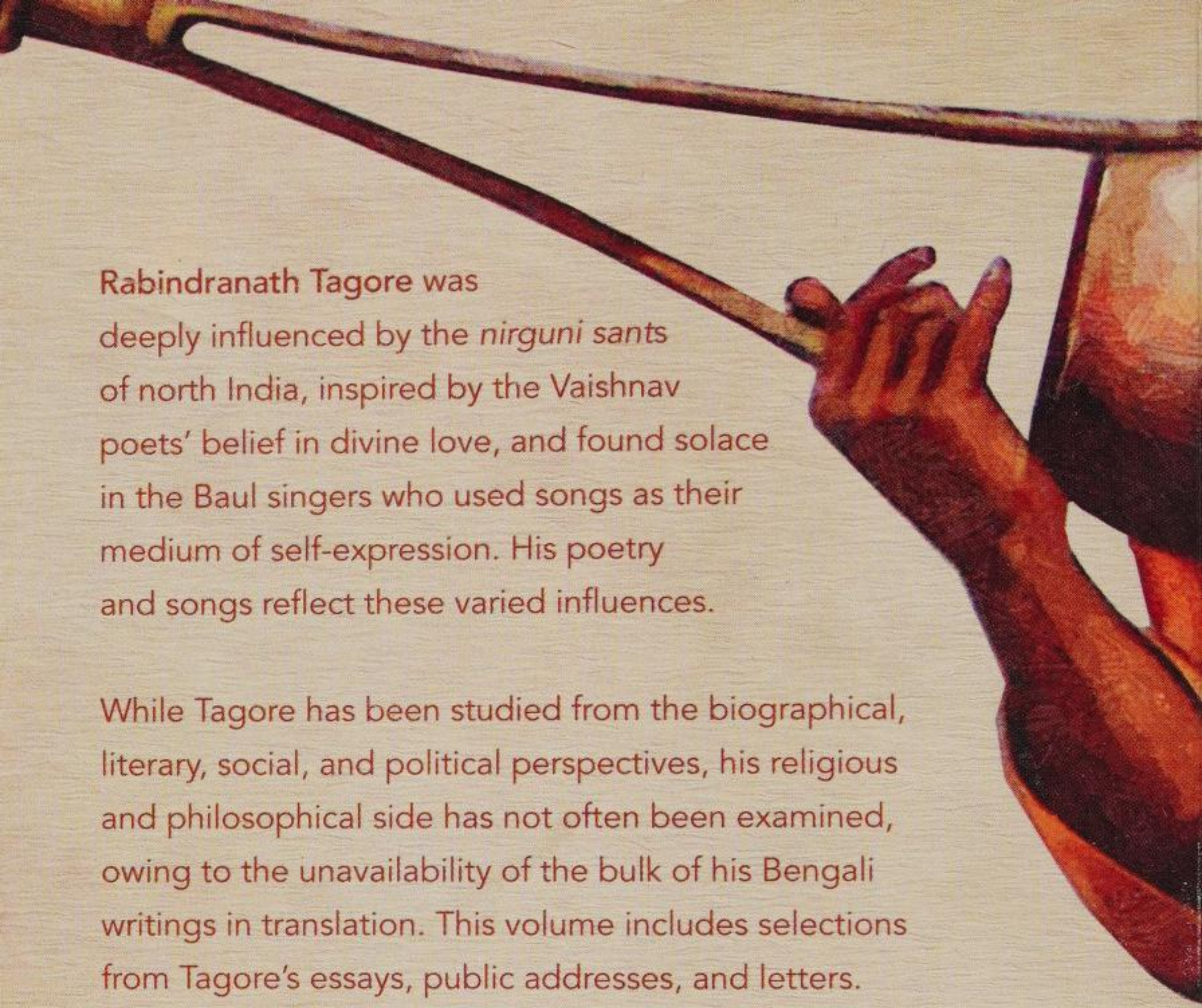

Rabindranath Tagore was deeply influenced by the *nirguni sants* of north India, inspired by the Vaishnav poets' belief in divine love, and found solace in the Baul singers who used songs as their medium of self-expression. His poetry and songs reflect these varied influences.

While Tagore has been studied from the biographical, literary, social, and political perspectives, his religious and philosophical side has not often been examined, owing to the unavailability of the bulk of his Bengali writings in translation. This volume includes selections from Tagore's essays, public addresses, and letters. The lucid translation makes accessible the hitherto relatively neglected area of his prose writings and speeches. With a focus on the critique of contemporary Hinduism, conceptions of God and religion, and ethical activism, this book identifies the various stages in the evolution of Tagore's religious thought beginning from the 1880s.

In his comprehensive introduction, Amiya P. Sen identifies the originality of Tagore's religious and philosophic conceptions. Sen also situates Tagore's religious life and thought in his time and, importantly, places him within trends in contemporary Hindu religious and philosophical thought.

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Translated from the original Bengali with an Introduction by

Amiya P. Sen

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For

Subodh Chandra Basu and

(Late) Ila Rani Basu

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PREFACE

The idea and inspiration behind this work goes back to the year 2007, when I had the good fortune of being appointed Tagore Professor at Rabindra Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. I consider this fortunate and something of an exception given the fact that at that time I had no claim whatsoever of being a Tagore scholar, even though the intellectual and cultural history of modern Bengal inspired and excited me very much. However, by the time I contemplated moving to Visva-Bharati, there had grown in me a keen interest in the religious life and thought of Rabindranath Tagore. I distinctly recall having startled the Selection Committee (in which were seated professors Rajat Kanta Ray, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Amiya Deb, and Nabaneeta Dev Sen) with my professed intentions of translating and commenting upon Tagore's Santiniketan Lectures (1908–15). Given my antecedents as a historian with an inadequate knowledge or training in philosophy, religion, and, above all, of the Bengali language, this must have sounded quite audacious. After all these years, it occurs to me that while my peers had every reason to doubt my competence, they did come to appreciate the sincerity of my intentions. I am happy to have now justified their trust, however ineptly.

Extenuating circumstances compelled me to quit Visva-Bharati even before this project could take off. All the same, during the time that I spent at Rabindra Bhavan and Santiniketan, I did come to feel more intensely the exceptional presence of Tagore and acquired a greater familiarity with his work. What also encouraged me and deepened my interest was my periodically running into several eminent Tagore scholars, all of whom were compulsively drawn to the Rabindra Bhavan Archives and Library. Among these were Sukanta Chaudhuri, Uma Das Gupta (Uma-di to me), Martin Kämpchen, the O'Connells (the late Joe O'Connell and Kathy), Swapan Majumdar, then director of Rabindra Bhavan, and several others. I recall with fondness the post-lunch gossip that I regularly had with Supriya Roy (Supriya-di), Samiran Nandi, and Lachmi Gupta (all on the staff at Rabindra Bhavan), which, in an informal but endearing way, brought me closer to Rabindranath and the world that he had created around him.

Back in Delhi, the project had to be shelved for some time, primarily on account of difficulties in procuring source material. A formal proposal for this book was submitted to the Oxford University Press (OUP) only by the closing months of 2012 and was accepted, I am happy to say, quite promptly. I thank the editors at OUP who have helped create and sustain some enthusiasm on this project.

Even though it carries a substantive editorial introduction, this book comes nowhere close to a monograph on the religious life and thought of Tagore. It was essentially devised for those who felt disadvantaged at not being able to access important prose writings of Tagore, especially on religious and philosophical subjects, the bulk of which still remains untranslated. Needless to say, my engagement with the intellectual and cultural contexts in which Tagore's religious thought or writings may be understood carries the intent and concerns of a historian of ideas.

Without a doubt, the religious or philosophical thought of Rabindranath Tagore is more evocatively expressed in his poetry

and songs. But these are also better known and more frequently translated, whether by Tagore himself or else later-day scholars. Shifting one's attention to prose writings, on the other hand, helps bring out the more polemical side to Tagore: now battling the Hindu orthodox, now expressing impatience at pretentious truth-claims, or chiding one of his several correspondents on misapprehending God and religion. While Rabindranath's poetry and songs are no doubt important and have been copiously used in the course of producing this work, for a cultural historian of modern Bengal such as I, his prose writings have proved to be no less instructive and useful.

A word on the translation. Critics have been known to complain about the difficulties with Tagore's prose. About 50 years ago, V.S. Naravane noted the problem with Tagore's recurring use of 'parentheses' which, allegedly, 'smothered the main idea as a creeper smothers the tree on which it thrives'.[1] While that may or may not be true with Tagore's English prose, handling the Bengali has been no easy task. Tagore's Bengali prose does not often carry the lucid directness of Bankimchandra and particularly in his religious or philosophical essays, there is indeed an over-abundant use of metaphor and what one might somewhat imaginatively call 'literary froth'. The Santiniketan Lectures are themselves a case in point. At most times, therefore, a purely literary translation that was doggedly faithful to the original would have been hard to come by, and my endeavour really has been to present to the reader the essential purport of an idea or argument.

This work was put together with the hope that it would elicit greater public interest in a relatively neglected area within Tagore studies but, more importantly, to inspire further scholarly interrogation. It is not very often that literary critics have been drawn to a study of Tagore's religious life and thought. With me,

[1] V.S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought: A Philosophical Survey* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House and ICCR, 1964), p. 4.

however, a gathering interest in historical religion has led to a greater appreciation of the enduring literary and cultural legacy of Rabindranath Tagore.

Rather than translate an entire lecture or piece of writing in full, I have chosen to translate only suitable excerpts that reveal the main drift of an idea or argument. Finally, let me add a word on the transliteration. In most instances, I have tried to be phonetically faithful to the Bengali original. Hence my preference for *Jeebondebata* over *Jiban Debata* that has been hitherto more frequently used.

New Delhi
2013

INTRODUCTION

I cannot, with any clarity or definitiveness, claim to comprehend what religion means to me. It is not something that is prescriptive, nor written down in the form of some philosophical discourse. Once detached from everyday life, it is quite impossible for me to understand this religion.

—Translated from Rabindranath Tagore, *Atmaparichay* (1917)

It is not in truth that it all ends, nor in auspiciousness. The end lies in the Non-Dual (*advaita*). It is not in the natural world that our journey ends, nor in the social; its end lies with our realizing the Great Soul (*paramatman*). This is the true message of India.

—Translated from Rabindranath Tagore, *Teen* (1909)

The religious thought of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) has only occasionally been a matter of scholarly interest, possibly for three reasons. First, both in his time and in ours Tagore has been essentially taken to be a prodigious and prolific literary figure: poet, dramatist, essayist, and song-writer. Apparently, such an understanding has distracted from a serious examination of his religious speeches or writings as a separate genre. In recent times, a literary critic commenting upon the religious life and thought of Tagore has somewhat grudgingly admitted how religious thought or reflections form only one of the several

constitutive elements of his life.[1] A similar reading, I find, has also occurred with one of Tagore's near contemporaries, the novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894). In modern Bengal, Bankim's popularity has rested primarily on his novels, apparently to the exclusion of his many significant prose writings without a proper study of which no true assessment of this significant Hindu thinker of colonial India would be possible. Nonetheless, the early biographers of Bankim neglected to study his religious and philosophical treatises. His first biographer, Sachis Chattopadhyay, did not engage with Bankim's religious thought until the work went into a second edition in 1915.[2]

Second, with Bankim, as with Rabindranath, contemporary writers and critics may have also been discouraged by the fact that their understanding of Hinduism was often at odds with contemporary Hindu religious thought and practices. More recently, it has even been suggested that Bankim's accommodating the idea of God and religion within his moral and philosophical discourse was a practical concession that he reluctantly made to public sentiment.[3] In his magnum opus, the *Krishnacharitra* (1886, 1892), Bankim depicts a sanitized God (Krishna) who was not known to either Hindu-Bengali folk life or high textual culture. In another essay dating back to these years, he even has a Vaishnav mendicant feast on mutton curry only to prove that religion did not rest on any scrupulous regard for food or drink![4] In his reminiscences,

[1] Taraknath Ghosh, *Rabindranather Dharmachinta* (Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1962), p. 85.

[2] Amiya P. Sen (ed.), *Bankim's Hinduism: An Anthology of Writings by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), p. 3. Sachis Chattopadhyay's biography was originally published in 1911.

[3] Bhavatosh Dutta, *Bangalir Manavdharma* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 2000), p. 59.

[4] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Gourdas Babajir Bhikshar Jhuli' (1885); reproduced in *Bankim Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay), ed. J.C. Bagal, vol. II (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2004 [reprint]), pp. 229–35.

(*Jeebonsmriti*, 1912) Rabindranath has confessed that he had little or no empathy with the religion that his own family so actively propagated.[5] In the view of his biographer, Prashanta Kumar Pal, Tagore carried out his duties as songwriter and minister for the Adi Brahmo Samaj more out of deference to his father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), and that this weakened after the latter's death.[6] Even in the 1880s and 1890s, when barely 30, Rabindranath sharply differed with the ways in which a new pride of race and cultural revivalism was trying to bring back into Hinduism irrational practices, superstition, and specious cultural theories.[7] In the closing years of the nineteenth century and for some years thereafter, the religious thought or writings of neither Bankim nor Rabindranath could excite Hindu public imagination, whether of the liberal-reformist camp or the orthodox. In the case of Bankim, the first major study of his religious and philosophical thought by Hirendranath Dutta arrived only in the 1940s and the first serious reflections into the religious life and thought of Rabindranath had really to wait until after the publication of his *Gitanjali*.[8]

Possibly a third reason that might explain the scholarly reluctance to engage with the religious thought of Rabindranath Tagore is its highly personalized and idiosyncratic nature.

[5] Rabindranath Tagore, *Jeebonsmriti*; reproduced in *Rabindra Rachanabali* (hereafter RR), Sulabh Samskaran, vol. 9 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2004 [reprint]), p. 480.

[6] Prashanta Kumar Pal, *Robi Jeeboni* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2006 [reprint]), p. 20.

[7] A good summary of this occurs in S.C. Sarkar, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Renaissance in Bengal', in *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1970), p. 160–1.

[8] Other than reviews of the *Gitanjali* and post-*Gitanjali* writings in the Western press, an early example of an Indian study of Tagore's religious thought is Prabodh Chandra Sen, 'Rabindranather Dharma Chinta', *Visva Bharati Patrika*, vol. 11, Sravan 1359 BS/July–August 1952.

Occasionally, this may have enthused literary critics but not the historian. In a recent study, Rajat Kanta Ray notes how Tagore's greatly enigmatic concept of 'Jeebondebata' has failed to draw any serious historical scholarship.[9] Also, the religion that Tagore spoke of, more so in his advanced years, is also palpably removed from the concerns that came to pass in the years immediately preceding. It is not often that Tagore applied the tools of history or anthropology to understand religion, which men like Bankim and Ramendrasundar Trivedi (1864–1919) had used quite interrogatively.[10] Here it is worth contrasting the very different positions that Bankim and Rabindranath take on the purport of the Gayatri Mantra. This mantra remained extremely important for Tagore and in the *Jeebonsmriti*, he recalls having undergone certain inexplicable mystic experiences upon repeatedly chanting it.[11] Tagore found the mantra uniting him with the cosmos; Bankim's approach, on the other hand, strongly historicist as it was, remains quite firm in arguing that the mantra invoked the

[9] Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Jeebondebata: Rabindra Rachana Samkalan* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2010), pp. 16–17.

[10] Three instances that I have personally found are the following. In a letter to Ajit Kumar Chakaravarti, dated 31 May 1908, Rabindranath indicates how the ethical and metaphysical thought in the Gita may have been determined by contemporary developments. The letter is cited in Prashanta Kumar Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 6 (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2004 [reprint]), p. 12. Also see his 'Saktipuja' (1919), later included in the collection *Kalantar* (1937); reproduced in RR, vol. 12, p. 583f. This particular essay is excerpted in Part II of this book under Essays. In *Creative Unity* (1922), Tagore offers anthropological explanations for certain religious trends and developments. See *Creative Unity*; reproduced in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (hereafter EW), ed. Sisir Kumar Das, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999 [reprint]), p. 518. Such readings are to be distinguished from his perceptive readings of Indian history as in 'Bharatvarshe Itihas' (*Bhartvarsha*, 1902) and 'Bharatvarshe Itihaser Dhara' (*Parichay*, 1912).

[11] Rabindranath Tagore, *Jeebonsmriti*, RR, vol. 9, pp. 437–8.

sun and not the cosmic Creator, and that the Gayatri itself was not some divinity but the name of a metre found in Vedic literature.[12] Unlike Bankim or some other like-minded thinkers of the time, Rabindranath does not engage with the origin or functions of religion. Also, by his own admission, he was not a *sadhaka* (spiritual practitioner) or a man sufficiently familiar with formal Hindu philosophy. This at once separates him from some well-known contemporaries who contributed significantly to the religious life and thought of modern Bengal and were progressively enshrined in public memory, as, for instance, the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), the Hindu missionary Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) who created a global interest in reformed Hinduism, the Brahmo theologian Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) who attempted to synthetically fuse various religious ideas and symbols, or Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) who represented a constructive combination of the sadhaka and the philosopher. Religion for Rabindranath increasingly became a matter of aspiration, combining a deep-seated spiritual quest with an intense love for aesthetic experience, struggling to find creative expression in the world. What we often find in him is not tangible religious thought but inchoate intuitive feeling, not concrete expressions of god or divinity but subtle and extremely artistic formulations of the good and sublime that could be intensely personal.

What also makes it especially difficult to relate to Tagore is that his approach to religion resembles neither the conformism of the exegete, who, when engaging with a tradition, situates himself within it, nor the hermeneutic freedom of the critic who prefers to examine matters from the outside. This makes Rabindranath's relationship with established Hindu religious and philosophical

[12] See his 'Sabita o Gayatri', originally published in the Bengali journal *Prochar* in 1884 and later included in the collection *Debtattwa o Hindudharma*. The Bengali essay is available in translation in Sen, *Bankim's Hinduism*, pp. 60–3.

traditions quite tenuous and problematic. On closer scrutiny, it seems somewhat oversimplified to project him as a Vedantin as Radhakrishnan attempted to do in 1918.[13] In 1941, Hirendranath Dutta extended this line of argument calling Rabindranath a 'Vedantist by inheritance' quite oblivious of the difficulties that the Maharshi had with 'Vedanta', especially when taken to be synonymous with the non-dualist philosophy of Acharya Sankara, which it often is.[14] Tagore, however, has often claimed that his religion reflected the spontaneous instincts of the poet and not the structured, argumentative discourse of the philosopher.[15] Often in his speeches and writings he has tended to sink what otherwise appear to be pressing philosophical debates within the deeper and more intractable domain of spontaneous feeling and to reconcile seemingly opposed viewpoints within an underlying harmony. Not surprisingly, scholars attempting to locate the philosophical foundations of Tagore's Vedanta with any degree of precision have ended up in supporting palpably different viewpoints. Thus, the philosopher P.T. Raju found Tagore's Vedanta to be close to the school of Vallabhacharya,[16] Edward Dimock to

[13] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1918; and Baroda: Good Companions Publishers, 1961). Tagore's discomfiture with the philosophical subtleties of Vedanta obviously escaped Radhakrishnan but the other point to note is that a work published in 1918 could not have taken stock of the somewhat subversive nature of Tagore's later writings. Even when focusing on Tagore's poetry, Radhakrishnan would have been ill-equipped to notice the significant semantic and stylistic differences between the *Gitanjali* in original Bengali and its English rendering by Tagore.

[14] Hirendranath Dutta, 'Rabindranath as a Vedantist', *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, vol. VII, parts 1–2 (May–October 1941) (Tagore Birthday Number), p. 31.

[15] Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Religion of Man' (1931), Hibbert Lectures for 1930; reproduced in EW, vol. 3 (2008 [reprint]), p. 121.

[16] P.T. Raju, 'The Idealism of Rabindranath Tagore', *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (NS), vol. V, part III (November 1939–January 1940), p. 209.

the *bhedabheda* school,[17] and Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta with the work *Parijata Sourabha* of Nimbarka.[18] Even when he admitted the Upanishads to have been one of the major textual sources for his religious and philosophical thought, Tagore's reading of these texts was both selective and idiosyncratic. For a person deeply rooted in a cosmic view of man and god, Rabindranath rarely, if ever, creatively comments upon, say, the *Chandogya Upanishad*, principally on account of its supporting the idea of a metaphysical identity between the human soul and the divine (*tat tvam asi*)[19] or even on account of pantheistic suggestions (*sarvam khalwidam Brahman*).[20] Even as late as 1935, he was anxious that the Brahmo Samaj did not commit the error of mistaking the presence of the Infinite Brahman in all living beings with taking the world itself to be Brahman.[21] Rabindranath, to cite another example, used the Vaishnav tradition in a manner that no Vaishnav poet or theologian might have. Prima facie, it might seem that his poetic sensibility or imagination put him more on the side of the Vaishnav poets than Vaishnav metaphysicians and yet this may not be an apt reading of Tagore since, unlike the *padavali* poets of late medieval Bengal, he speaks of his theo-aesthetic experience, a creative combination of religiosity and *rasa*, not vicariously as the poets themselves had done but in a directly personal mode. Bengali Vaishnav poets never fancied themselves as the separated female lover (Radha), pining

[17] Edward C. Dimock, 'Rabindranath Tagore: The Greatest of Bauls of Bengal', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 19. no. 1 (November 1959), p. 51.

[18] Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta, *Bangali Kee Atmaghati o Annanya Rachana* (Calcutta: Paschim Bangla Academy, 2000), p. 69.

[19] *Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII.8.7.

[20] *Chandogya Upanishad*, III.14.1.

[21] Tagore's letter to Indira Devi, dated 13 January 1935; reproduced in Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipotro*, vol. 5 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1993 [reprint]), pp. 99–100. This was with reference to *Chandogya Upanishad*, III.14.1.

for union with the beloved as did Tagore.[22] His Vaishnavism also rejected public displays of ecstatic emotion[23] as had been popularized by the Vaishnav saint Sri Krishna Chaitanya (1486–1533) and closer to his time by fellow Brahmos like Keshab Chandra who resorted to the use of public religious processions (*nagar sankirtans*). Tagore did not claim to know the Bhagavad Gita very well[24] but his familiarity with or interest in the *Bhagavad Purana*, a text considered supremely holy within the world of Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaishnavism, was practically non-existent.

Unlike most Brahmo religious figures of the nineteenth century (and the list includes Rammohun Roy), Tagore had an avid interest in medieval Indian religion, particularly the quotidian religious culture of the *nirguni sants* of north India that sometimes overtakes his attachment to early philosophical texts. Rabindranath offered the first English translation of the songs of the sixteenth-century radical poet and reformer Kabir to the world outside India, and was instrumental in strengthening pub-

lic interest in what he called the '*maramiyas*', mystic singers from rural Bengal as, for instance, the Bauls.[25] On the other hand, as

[22] Biman Bihari Majumdar, *Rabindra Sahitye Padavalir Sthan* (Calcutta: Bookland Pvt. Ltd, 1961), pp. 53, 79–81; and Satyendranath Roy (ed.), *Rabindranather Chinta Jagat: Dharmachinta*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Granthalay Pvt. Ltd, 2007), p. 58. In 1939, Tagore admitted that his attempts to replicate Vaishnav verses as in *Bhanusingher Padavali* (1884) amounted to trespassing into an area that he did not quite know. See Majumdar, *Rabindra Sahitye Padavalir Sthan*, p. 10.

[23] For typical examples, see Poems #45, 52 in *Naibedya* (1901); reproduced in RR, vol. 4, 2004 (reprint).

[24] See his letter of 31 May 1908 to Ajit Kumar Chakravarti cited earlier. On the contrary, by one estimate, he is known to have cited the Gita at least 35 times. Pampa Majumdar, *Rabindrasanksritir Bharatiya Rup o Utsa* (Caclutta, 1972), cited in Bhavatosh Dutta, *Bangali Manashe Vedanta* (Calcutta: Sahityalok, 1986), p. 91.

[25] Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1914); reproduced in EW, vol. 1 (2011 [reprint]), pp. 488–540. For recent scholarly

has been amply demonstrated, his Kabir is not the angry, abusive, and antinomian figure that otherwise appears in folk memory or extant Sant literature. What is more explicit in Tagore's Kabir is a sharp rejection of sectarianism, of Brahmanical pedantry, irrational forms of worship, and the radical inversion of conventionally accepted values or imageries. Tagore appears to have been more impressed with Kabir's spirit of radical social protest than as an original religious thinker in his own right. His handling of potent sexual metaphors or imageries in Kabir's verses is as problematic as those by Max Müller when translating select Upanishads, or by the monks of the Ramakrishna Order when translating the gospel of Sri Ramakrishna from the original Bengali.[26] Indeed, Rabindranath found great solace and spiritual

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critiques of Kabir, see Vijay C. Mishra, 'Two Truths Are Told: Tagore's Kabir', in Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod (eds), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), pp. 167–80; Linda Hess, 'The Cow Is Sucking at the Calf's Teat: Kabir's Upside Down Language', *History of Religion*, vol. 22, no. 4 (May 1983), p. 314f; Roland Stahl, 'The Philosophy of Kabir', *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 4, no. 2 (July 1954), pp. 144–55; John Cort, 'Will the Real Kabir Please Stand Up?' review of *The Bijak of Kabir* edited by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 1985), pp. 249–50. A good account of Tagore's interest in Bauls appears in Dimock, 'Rabindranath Tagore'. Tagore regularly published Baul songs in the journal *Probashi*, though was not the first to do so. He also cited select Baul songs in 'An Indian Folk Religion' (*Creative Unity*, 1922) and in his presidential address delivered before the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1926 titled 'The Philosophy of Our People' first published in *The Modern Review*, vol. 39, no. 299 (January 1926), pp. 77–84.

[26] For Tagore's inept rendering of Kabir's imagery, see Mishra, 'Two Truths Are Told'. Patrick Olivelle draws our attention to how, offended by explicit references to sexuality in the Upanishads, Max Müller either left them untranslated or else rendered these into Latin! See his *Upanishads: A New Translation by Patrick Olivelle* (New York: Oxford

inspiration in the unassuming and spontaneous self-expression in Baul singers. In fact, the use of songs or poetry as the preferred mode of self-expression is something he would have at once detected as a common quality bringing him closer to rebels or dissenters like Kabir and the Bauls. And yet, as Dimock has argued persuasively, the Bauls and Rabindranath belonged to entirely different social-cultural worlds, and in many respects such differences may have been unbridgeable.[27] Kshitimohan Sen (1880–1960), Tagore's friend and co-worker for several years, and a pioneer in anthropological research on popular culture of medieval north India, rightly notes that for the Bauls, songs did not constitute 'literature' that could be placed in the public domain.[28] They did not really wish to be communicators in the sense Rabindranath as a poet was compelled to be. Besides, upper-caste society in nineteenth-century Bengal, even when drawn to quotidian religious culture, remained extremely careful about maintaining some social and ritual distance between the two. Sri Ramakrishna himself, who is known to have visited Kartabhaja and Nabarasik congregations north of Kolkata and accommodated within his repertoire, religious imageries emanating in such quarters, warned his devotees to stay clear of what he

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University Press, Oxford World's Classics, 2008 [reprint]), p. lvi. The problems with translating Mahendra Nath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Katahmrita* were first critically and comprehensively revealed in 1991 by Jeffrey J. Kripal and has subsequently led to a huge controversy in India. A useful summary of this debate occurs in Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited* (Delhi: Motilal Banrasidass Publishers, 2010).

[27] Dimock, 'Rabindranath Tagore'. Ironically enough, the epithet 'greatest of the Bauls' was given to Rabindranath Tagore by none other than Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, an expert on obscure and heterodox religious cults who should have known better.

[28] Kshitimohan Sen Shastri, *Banglar Baul*, Leela Lectures for 1949 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1993), p. 64.

described as 'dirty paths'.[29] Though he does not really bring this up in his religious discourse, Rabindranath, it is safe to imagine, would have disapproved of the great emphasis placed by popular cults on the office of the guru or the several extremely esoteric religious practices commonly adopted by Bauls, Sahajiyas, and other comparable cults including the ingestion of human waste and bodily fluids or ritual copulation.[30] Given the fact that praxis was extremely important to the spiritual life of Bauls, the difference in social and cultural worlds between Rabindranath and popular rural culture that Dimock hints at is clearly wider than usually imagined.

Paradoxically, scholars like Radhakrishnan render a disservice to Rabindranath by somewhat diluting the originality of his religious or philosophical conceptions. 'In interpreting the philosophy and message of Rabindranath Tagore,' Radhakrishnan wrote in 1918, 'we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion and art of which his work is the outcome and expression. We do not know whether it is Rabindranath's own heart or the heart of India that is beating here.'[31] Reviews of his translation of Kabir met with similar problematic readings. 'The poet Kabir seems to have occupied a not very different position in the fifteenth century in India from that which Mr. Tagore is now holding', remarked a Western reviewer. 'We should be hard put to say where the difference is between the *Gitanjali* and Kabir's poem was to be

[29] For Ramakrishna's selective acceptance of various religious traditions even within an overarching universality, see Amiya P. Sen, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001), essay III (ii).

[30] For details, see Rahul Peter Das, 'Problematic Aspects of the Sexual Rituals of the Bauls of Bengal', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 112 (1992), pp. 388–432; and S.B. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969).

[31] Radhakrishnan, *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. xiii.

found.'[32] Interestingly, Tagore himself contributes to perpetuate this problematic reading of Indian religious and cultural developments by resorting to some uncritical essentialization. In trying to answer his Western critics, he appears to have suggested that when composing *Gitanjali*, he had been more influenced by the religious thought of Kabir than by Vaishnavs,[33] when even a cursory scrutiny of these poems will suggest otherwise. In Kabir, for instance, there is none of the reciprocal love between God and man that one finds in *Gitanjali*. Tagore also refers to a 'real' India that he claimed to understand better than most others and to the underlying continuity that he could detect between Upanishadic thought and the songs of the 'maramiyas'. For him, the Brahmo Samaj, even as a modern reformist body, represented the eternal, quintessential spirit of India. In 1949, while delivering the Leela Lectures at the University of Calcutta, Kshitimohan Sen may have hit upon a truth that may serve to explain Rabindranath's attitude towards religious traditions. In part, Tagore remained consistently critical of the irrational and socially oppressive qualities embedded in brahmanical textual culture but equally, he took the view, also found in Bauls, of going by that which was new and dynamic, not stale and uninspiring collections of the old. Like the Bauls, he may have believed that so long as man required a religious consciousness, new thoughts and ideas would continue to flow.[34]

Situating Tagore in the Religious Life and Thought of Modern Bengal

If in his religious thinking Rabindranath Tagore included things that were perceptively new, he also appeared to have

[32] Cited in Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 'An Aspect of Tagore Criticism in the West: The Cloud of Mysticism', *Mahfil*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1966), p. 13.

[33] Abu Syed Ayub, *Adhunikta o Rabindranath* (Calcutta: Bharavi, 1968), p. 109.

[34] Shastri, *Banglar Baul*, p. 67.

articulated certain pressing concerns that originated somewhat earlier in time. In this sense, Tagore's self-understanding and re-interpretation of the Hindu religious tradition was determined by colonial modernity and the distinctive subjectivity of the Western-educated Hindu. Modern Hinduism was affected by certain critical public debates and, essentially, these took place around three issues: the foundations of religion and religious life, the nature of relationship between God and the phenomenal world, and the social functions of religion.

In pre-modern encounters between Hinduism and the Christian West, the religion of the Hindus was often critiqued and for that reason also zealously guarded by the Hindus. Partly influenced by British Orientalism and the cultural nostalgia that soon seized them, religion became the preferred mode of self-expression on the part of the colonized Hindu intelligentsia. As Bankimchandra was to famously remark, in the Hindu lexicon, there could be no single word for 'religion' since that represented a value which permeated every single aspect of the Hindu's life.[35] In the nineteenth century, uniquely, evangelist-utilitarian attacks on Hindu religious beliefs and customs were also crucially joint to theories about moral depravity negatively affecting material growth or advancement. It was now possible to foist upon ideas about Revelation, a development chronology of the Empire, and a positivist notion of time and history. The singular effect of this new discourse on the Hindu mind was to make religion the site of social and moral progress. An argument that crucially remained with Hindu cultural self-assertion throughout the nineteenth and

[35] 'With other peoples religion is only a part of life, there are things religious and there are things lay and secular. To the Hindu, his whole life was religious.... All life to him was religion and religion never received a name from him because it never had for him an existence apart from all that had received a name.' Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Letters on Hinduism', *Bankim Rachanabali*, ed. J.C. Bagal, vol. III (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969), pp. 230–1.

early twentieth centuries and affected Rabindranath no less was the mutuality of needs that the West and India shared. Indeed, the West could help improve material life in India but she, in turn, had to be redeemed by a spiritually advanced India. The West, Tagore alleged, was producing mechanical power in excess of its spiritual control whereas India had produced a spiritual control in excess of its vitality.[36]

The first tangible symptoms of this new preoccupation may be seen in the life and labours of Raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833). His pioneering effort lay not so much in aiding the legal abolition of sati as in making the transcendental, *atman*-oriented philosophy of the Upanishads into a practicable social gospel. Also, by uniquely translating and publishing a part of the Vedic literature (mainly Upanishads) Rammohun appears to have ushered in, at least in theory, some kind of religious democracy whereby texts hitherto misappropriated on the strength of social privilege assumed elements of living and popular faith. Rammohun was really the first modern Hindu to express concerns about how the existence of a God and his 'perfect' laws had to be made a point of reference as against the bewildering variety of ever-changing and imperfect man-made laws. Thus, in postulating the idyll of a morally perfect being as essential for the ordering of human society, he clearly anticipates the Positivist Bankimchandra who was to argue similarly in his *Dharmatattwa* (1888).[37] However, it would be also important to note that with both Rammohun and Bankim, an innate humanism is somewhat diluted by making God, and

[36] *Creative Unity* (1922); reproduced in EW, vol. 2, p. 543.

[37] Amiya P. Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal, c. 1800–1900: Essays on Religion, History and Culture* (New Delhi: Primus, 2000), p. 25; Bankim's *Dharmattwa* is reproduced in *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. II and also available in English translation, *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's Dharmatattwa*, trans. Apratim Ray, with an introduction by Amiya P. Sen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

not man, the exemplar of all moral virtue. Bankim rejected a fully impersonal, transcendental Absolute which could not evoke man's ethical feeling or sensitivity. In his *Krishnacharitra*, it is God incarnated as man that re-establishes the rule of moral righteousness on earth, not some extraordinary mortal.

That Rammohun, notwithstanding his occasional lapses into *bairagya* and depressing thoughts about death and a transitory world (his prayer songs typically convey such sentiments), never lost sight of the functional uses of religion can be gauged from his unique rendering of scripture. 'A votary of God obtains his desired objects,' he remarked when commenting upon *Mundaka Upanishad* (III.19), 'anyone desiring honour and advantage shall revere Him'.[38] Rammohun was also the first to emphasize, apparently in keeping with deists like William Paley (1743–1805), that virtue lay in doing good to mankind in obedience to God's will.[39] At least in three places, in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*,[40] the *Brahman Sebadhi* (the Bengali equivalent of the *Brahmanical Magazine*), and in a small tract called *Brahmopasana* (1828), Rammohun tangentially refers to the idea of selfless action (*nishkam karma*) that produces both moral cleansing of the soul and frees the practitioner from the causal bondages of birth and death.[41] Arguably, this again anticipates the discourse of both Bankim (particularly in his *Dharmatattwa*) and Vivekananda's unique rendering of 'Practical Vedanta' (1896).

Rammohun partly transformed Vedanta as a transcendental philosophy into personalized religion, and in doing this he also somewhat tendentiously collapsed the distinction between the monism of the Upanishads (Reality is one and undifferentiated) and monotheism (the worship of a single God). Even so, he did not overlook the importance of scriptural authority or the office

[38] Rammohun Roy, cited in Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal*, p. 29.

[39] Ibid., p. 28.

[40] *Brahma Sutra*, III.4.24–6, 32–3.

[41] Ibid., p. 33.

of the guru. These, incidentally, were precisely the aspects that came under the most severe criticism from some Hindu-Bengalis who had more faithfully internalized the Enlightenment and Anglican-Protestant critiques of religion. For the deist and naturalist Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820–1886), nature and not scripture held the key to the mysteries of God and creation. It was thus that he could write: 'The whole world is our scripture and pure knowledge our revered teacher.... The world that is directly cognizable to us leaves us in no doubt as the fact that this entire cosmos is but that excellent scripture created by God Himself'.[42] Evidently, for the author of this statement, there could be no discernible difference between the work of God and his word. In his later life, Dutta moved from acknowledging the goodness of a Creator God to pure agnosticism. In his preface to the *Bharatvarshiya Upasak Sampraday*, Part I (1870), he refers to how the Upanishads testified to both the creator and creation being unknowable and to how several schools of Hindu philosophy (Nyaya Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta) did not acknowledge a personal God.[43]

By the 1850s, however, the rational agnosticism of Dutta was an isolated voice in modern Bengal. As Europe too increasingly rejected the idea of a distant God of the deists, the spiritual

[42] Translated from Akshay Kumar Dutta's essay published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Baisakh 1777 shak. (April–May 1855), no. 141, p. 10, cited in Mohammad Saiful Islam (ed.), *Vigyan Buddhi Charchar Agrapathik Akshay Kumar Dutta o Bangali Samaj* (Calcutta: Renaissance Publishers, 2006), p. 28. Translation mine.

[43] Sadhana Majumdar, 'Akshay Kumar Dutter Juktivad o Dharmavichar', in Islam (ed.), *Vigyan Buddhi Charchar Agrapathik Akshay Kumar Dutta o Bangali Samaj*, pp. 269–70. Interestingly enough, Satyendranath Tagore (1842–1923), the Maharshi's second son, gives us to believe that in his childhood, the prayer book commonly used in family prayer meetings included a prayer authored by Akshay Kumar Dutta. See Satyendranath Tagore, *Amar Balyakatha o Bombai Probas* (Calcutta: Baitanik, 2010), p. 17.

successors of Rammohun revived theism with a vengeance without, however, allowing *pramana* (epistemic authority) to be based again on scripture or on the mediation of the guru. Dutta's scepticism was good enough for Maharshi Debendranath Tagore to seriously re-examine the question of scriptural authority. Further enquiry into Vedic literature proved to him that the Upanishads spoke with many voices, not all of which were amenable to the idea of a personal God or a created universe. It was also evident that these texts carried pantheistic ideas which claimed that God had transformed into the world (*parinamvad*). For the Maharshi, God could be the efficient cause (*nimitta*) but not the material cause (*upadan*) of the Universe: He was *Viswasrasta* (world creator) not *Viswarupa* (embodiment of the world).[44] This might explain why the Maharshi and for that matter even his son, Rabindranath, never seriously accepted the *Brahma Sutra* which attempted an aphoristic synthesis of Upanishadic thought, combining ideas that could be very differently interpreted. All the same, Debendranath admitted the importance of a source-book on which the reformed religion of the Brahmos could be based. Apparently, the Maharshi concurred in the evangelist view that if Hinduism was a religion, it too had to have its scripture. For this purpose, he compiled in 1848–9 the *Brahmodharmagrantha* which carried out the dual function of locating established textual support for doctrines he personally approved and setting down social and moral rules for the Brahmos to practise domestically and as a community.[45] In later years, fellow Brahmos were to accuse him of text torturing

[44] Two important sources for the evolution of religious thought in Debendranath are his autobiography, *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, eds Arabinda Mitra and Asim Ahmed (Calcutta: Chariot International, 1981) and the biography by Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, *Maharshi Debendranath Tagore* (Calcutta: Jigyasa, 1971 [reprint]).

[45] Debendranath Tagore, *Brahmodharma: Tatparya Sahita*, 2 vols (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1975 [reprint]).

and for needlessly overlooking the time-tested wisdom of the sages.[46]

In hindsight though, Debendranath appears to have initiated several ideas that endured and became the guiding principles of the Brahmo religion. First, there was the explicit rejection of ascetic renunciation which, in turn, came from the view that the world did not represent an illusion. There is a legend to the effect that this was a truth that struck the Maharshi with startling force when, quite accidentally, he set sight on a loose leaf from Rammohun's printed *Isopanishad*. If, as the opening lines of this Upanishad claimed that God's presence pervaded the entire world, argued Debendranath, the world had to be taken to be a gift to man from God. Importantly, that also rendered it auspicious and real.[47] Perhaps it is to this theocentric view of the world, albeit measured in human terms, that Rabindranath himself gave the name 'Jagat Brahmavad'.[48] Quite understandably, both Rammohun and Debendranath believed that the pious householder (*Brahmanistha grihastha*, a phrase occurring in the *Mahanirvan Tantra*, VIII.23.3) was as much entitled to a fruitful spiritual life as the world-renouncer. The world was both God's playground as well as that for man; it allowed for divine *leela* or God's inscrutable play as also for the morally and aesthetically creative labours of earthly men and women. Anyone who loved

[46] For a typical example, see *Life and Teachings of Pandit Sitanath Tattwabhushan: A Short Review* (Calcutta: Sitanath Tattwabhushan Birth Centenary, 1960), pp. 8–9, 22.

[47] *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, pp. 13–14.

[48] In his *Oitihya o Rabindranath* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1996), p. 136, Bhavatosh Dutta argues that the term was first used by the poet Mohitlal Majumdar (1888–1952) in the work *Kobi Rabindranath o Rabindrakabya*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta, 1954), p. 75. It would be more accurate to say that Majumdar popularized the term, not created it, since Rabindranath himself uses it in 'Manusher Dharma' (Kamala Lectures for 1933), delivered at the University of Calcutta; reproduced in RR, vol. 10 (2004 [reprint]), p. 632.

God had to love the world, observed the well-known Brahmo theologian Rajnarain Basu (1826–1899).[49] The Maharshi's second major contribution lay in proclaiming that religious life could not be modelled on the mechanical rules governing nature, a view that categorically rejected the scientific naturalism of Dutta. Nature indeed reflected God's handiwork but was no surrogate for God Himself. Left to itself, nature could be utterly chaotic, fearsome, uncontrollable, and, hence, there had to be a higher Power that made nature help sustain the world and man's life in it. Debendranath claimed to have directly received commandments (*adesh*) from God (a claim that only Keshab Chandra among Brahmos was to make after him) and this reportedly proved to him the moral and psychological superiority of theology over naturalism. 'We are not among those who seek God and this world,' he was to write, 'this world is acceptable to us only after we have made an acquaintance with God'.[50] Ironically enough, this strongly resembles the religious discourse of a man who, in some ways, Debendranath disliked or distrusted: Sri Ramakrishna. On 6 December 1884, Ramakrishna tried to impress upon Bankim, who appears to have carried the empirical bent of mind of Akshay Dutta that getting to know God Himself had to precede any empirical knowledge of the world he created.[51] The deistic idea of an absent deity was also firmly rejected by Keshab Chandra and still later by Vivekananda, who believed that the idea of a designer-god ipso facto admitted some limitation on the part of God. The Maharshi's third lasting contribution and an idea

[49] Rajnarain Basu, *Brahmodharmer Lakshan o Vrittanta* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj,1957 [1854]), p. 5.

[50] Debendranath Tagore, *Brahmodharmer Vyakhyan* (Calcutta: Sadhanran Brahmo Samaj, 1965 [2nd reprint]), p. 172. Translation mine.

[51] The excerpt as originally appearing in the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* is available in translation in Amiya P. Sen, *His Words: The Preachings and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2010), pp. 39–41.

that appears to have been accepted even by Hindu Vedantins like Vivekananda, was that religion was ultimately a matter of intuitive experience. An ethically pure heart, embellished by intuitive experiences, was best equipped to perceive the presence of God. Such thoughts enabled Debendranath to transform the rational and argumentative theology of Rammohun into a theist's pining for God-realization (*vyakulata*). Finally, there is the interesting and important modification that the Maharshi carried out to the Upanishadic theory of atman. Debendranath fully accepted the idea of an atman-oriented spirituality as typically revealed in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* but he also embellished this idea with contemporary notions of linear movement in time and history. 'The aim of spirituality is to constantly develop the soul.... At no time can the soul cease to travel on the road to improvement and excellence', he wrote.[52] Arguably, the genesis of this idea lies in the evolutionary schema of Herbert Spencer and like-minded social theorists of the time. This, as one critic rightly observes, is quite antithetical to Indian spirituality. In Upanishadic thought, as developed in Indian Idealism, the world was essentially what one created; an individual who believed in souls could not also entertain any objective notions of progress. For one, the idea of progress itself was relative and not absolute in nature.[53] By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, however, it was practically difficult to altogether escape the impact of evolutionary theories. Keshab Chandra, for example, claimed that Truth was not to be found in any single epoch and that God's will manifested itself through the broken light of history. This led him to further claim that the religious unity of mankind would occur not at the lowest

[52] Debendranath Tagore, cited in Chakravarti, *Maharshi Debendranath Tagore*, p. 571. Translation mine. Also see *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, p. 86.

[53] A perceptive point made by Bhavatosh Dutta in 'Western Influences in Tagore's Thought' included in his *Resurgent Bengal* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 2000), p. 102.

or simplest but the highest and most complex stages of human growth.[54] An important result following from such views was the tacit dismantling of theories relating the purity or authenticity of a religious tradition with its historically established age. At a time when theories about the divine origin of religion were under cloud, it was indeed tempting to substitute it by theories upholding degenerative time and the loss of what once was 'pristine' and 'pure'. On the other hand, for educated Hindus, locating the highest attainment of Hindu civilization in some distant historical past amounted to admitting that the universal law of progress, an idea that colonial modernity deeply impressed upon their minds, had somehow failed to touch their lives.

II

Critics who claim that religion and religious life were marginal to the neo-Hindu discourse of Bankimchandra clearly miss the point. Admittedly, Bankim's writings, whether in the 1870s or thereafter, are sharply critical of contemporary Hinduism. On the other hand, this does not really take away from the theocentrism in some of his major works. 'The belief in a personal God is not only a moral, but when the belief in the existence of God is once accepted, also an intellectual necessity of human nature', he wrote in his *Letters on Hinduism*.[55] Bankim might have offended Hindu public opinion by suggesting that contrary to popular belief, several Hindu festivals and customary practices had no foundations in religion, by the interest that he showed in the religion of the Positivists, however briefly, by suggesting that Radha as the playmate of Krishna had been tendentiously interpolated in Vaishnav literature, and by the argument that social and religious practices ought to be founded in some measure of public usefulness, not faith. On the other hand, he carried forward in many ways, the

[54] Keshab Chandra Sen, cited in Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal*, p. 65.

[55] See Sen, *Bankim's Hinduism*, p. 348.

religious agenda of the Brahmo Samaj. As with the Brahmos, his God was *nirakar* (formless) but not without attributes (*nirguna*).[56] He also appears to be a critical link between the theology of Debendranath Tagore for whom service to man was service rendered to God, and Rabindranath in whom notions of God are intensely humanistic. Chapters 14 and 15 of his *Dharmatattwa* claim that the adoration of God lies in the rightful performance of duty. But just what was this duty (*anustheya karma*)? For Bankim, importantly, such duties were those that God expected man to perform. To please God through such acts was his true adoration. This is virtually an echo of Debendranath's expression inserted into his *Brahmodharmagrantha* in 1849: *tasmin prretistasya priyakarya sadhanancha* (the worship of God lies through the performance of acts pleasing to Him).[57] The service of man, as Bankim understood it, was through selflessness and philanthropy and this puts him closer to the Brahmos than to Sri Ramakrishna whose emphasis was really on acknowledging the innate spirituality in man (*Siva gyane jiva seva*). Like Rabindranath after him, Bankim was also to emphasize how the nature of God was Love and how Divine Love itself may inspire the love of humanity.[58] Bhakti indeed is the quality that brought together Brahmos and Bankim even when they continued to express this in somewhat different ways. The Tagore family did not take kindly to Bankim's overtures to 'atheistic' religion of Comte, and Rabindranath

[56] One of his friends and fellow writers, Chandranath Basu, has testified to his deep-seated faith in the family icon at his birthplace, Kanthalpara. 'This deity is behind every good fortune that has come my way,' Bankim reportedly told Basu, '... whether in illness distress or danger it is to him that we turn. I also know that he loves us deeply.' Chandranath Basu, 'Bandhubatsal Bankim', in Soumendranath Basu (ed.), *Kacher Manush Bankim Chandra* (Calcutta: Tagore Research Institute, 1989), p. 105.

[57] *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, p. 113.

[58] See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Kamalakanto (Eka)', *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. II (1884), pp. 45–7.

too, as is only well known, thought that in the *Krishnacharitra* Bankim had projected Krishna as an embodiment of cold reason, not a figure who could elicit devotion.[59] On the whole though, Bankim remained more flexible on other related issues that agitated Hindus and Brahmos in these years as, for instance, on the issue of image worship.[60] His letters on the Hastie controversy, defending alleged idolatrous practices among educated Hindus, were greatly polemical[61] but even otherwise, his position on this issue is decidedly flexible than that of Rammohun and his successors in the Brahmo Samaj. In Rabindranth's own testimony, what prevented the Maharshi from showing a greater interest in Sri Ramakrishna was the latter's proclaimed status as a Kali worshipper[62] and Rabindranath himself, as Part II of this book

[59] See Rabindranath Tagore's review of *Krishnacharitra* (1895) in the collection *Adhunik Sahitya*; reproduced in RR, vol. 5, pp. 561–71. Bankim was to be also involved in a controversy with Rabindranath, then secretary of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, over the question of whether or not Truth may be modified in public interest. See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Adi Brahmo Samaj o Nabya Hindu Sampraday', *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. II (1884), pp. 837–42. In her reminiscences, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Rabindranath's niece, was to later recall that on this particular question Rabindranath's elder brothers, Dwijendranath and Jyotirindranath, did not quite support him even though Rabindranth's uncompromising position carried the day with the younger lot. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, *Jeeboner Jharapata* (Calcutta: Suvarnarekha, 2007), pp. 31–2.

[60] See, for instance, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'A Pointless Debate', translated excerpt from his *Srimadbhagavatgita* (1902), in Sen, *Bankim's Hinduism*, pp. 196–8.

[61] In effect, the debate between Rev. Hastie and Bankim hinged on the question of '*adhikar*' (entitlement) and much less on the propriety of image worship. See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'The Great Sova Bazar Sradh: "Letters in the Hastie Controversy"', *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. III, pp. 186–224.

[62] See Tagore's letter to Ramananda Chatterjee, dated 21 November 1929; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 12 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1986), p. 127. The letter is excerpted in translation in Part II of this book.

will show, was unwilling to accommodate the worship of images as a valid path towards relating to God.

There is one other matter on which reformist Hindus like Bankim remained separable from Brahmos and that had to do with the determination of what constituted authority. The Brahmos, as we know, gave up faith in the 'revealed' nature of the Vedas and in Bengali culture, where Vedic literature was relatively less known; this might have gone unnoticed but for the great Vedic revival undertaken by Swami Dayanand. By the early 1880s, the Vedic revival of Dayanand appears to have influenced Bengali opinion. During his debate with Rev. Hastie, Bankim was critiqued by no less than Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee, a Hindu-Brahmin-turned-Christian for failing to pay adequate respect to the Vedas. By 1885, the civilian Romesh Chandra Dutt had partly translated the *Rig Veda Samhita*. That year, the Hindu scholar and publicist Pandit Sashadhar Tarkachudamani (1851–1928) published his *Veda Vishaya Ingrazi Moter Protivad*, a tract countering Orientalist scholarship on the Vedas. In 1894, only a few months before his death, Bankim gave a series of lectures before graduates of the Calcutta University on Vedic literature. The Brahmos, by comparison, not only renounced faith in the Vedas but also excluded from their purview, the entire corpus of Puranic literature. This evidently ran contrary to the spirit of Hindu inclusivism and over time was critiqued by none other than Brahmos themselves.

In nineteenth-century Bengal, Bankim was possibly the last Hindu thinker to combine critical reflections on Hinduism with a general willingness to reform certain ideas and institutions. There is little reason to doubt his strong conservatism in social matters concerning women; on the other hand, even to his last days, he retained a faith in judging social practices in terms of contemporary relevance and usefulness. After him, Bengali Hinduism revealed two palpably different faces: one, a conservative backlash in the 1880s and 1890s that was particularly hostile to Brahmos and Brahmoism (represented chiefly by the group

of writers associated with the orthodox newspaper *Bangabasi*)[63] and the other, a reinvigoration of the ascetic ideal (rejected by the Brahmos since the days of Rammohun) by Sri Ramakrishna and his chief disciple Vivekananda. With regard to the first, Rabindranath responded only to the writer and literary critic Chandranath Basu (1844–1910) whom he personally regarded as a friend, notwithstanding sharp differences in opinion. During 1886–7, Tagore and Basu exchanged views on the need or propriety of image worship and the nature of Hindu marriages; in the early 1890s, this developed into a philosophical disputation with Tagore airing his differences with Basu's work, *Loytattwa* (1892).[64] Both the camps cited above were distrustful of social and religious reformism though not always for the same reasons. Between them, they also raised considerable scepticism with regard to the way Hindu religion and social practices had been interpreted since the time of Rammohun. The burgeoning Hindu nationalism of these years only further strengthened such scepticism.

The relationship between the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda movement and Rabindranath Tagore is one of the puzzling and under-researched aspects of religious and cultural history of modern Bengal. Tagore does not seem to have paid adequate attention to either Ramakrishna or Vivekananda in their lifetimes. There is a tangential reference to Vivekananda's triumphant journey to the West but this registered more a general happiness with a self-asserting Hinduism than a personal tribute

[63] For a detailed study of their writings, see Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal, 1872–1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 4.

[64] Excerpts from Rabindranath's rejoinder to Basu on the subject of Hindu marriages are available in translation in Amiya P. Sen (ed.), *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India*, Series: Debates in History and Society (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 156–61. For the controversy around Basu's *Loytattwa*, see Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 3 (2014), p. 210.

to the Swami.[65] In 1935, Tagore produced a short poem in honour of Ramakrishna, drawing attention to the latter's religious universality. This poem, it needs to be said, though respectful to the saint, appears to have misunderstood the purport of his universalism. Contrary to Tagore's claims ('Diverse courses of worship from varied springs of fulfilment have mingled in your meditation'),[66] Ramakrishna did not synthetically combine various religious experiences in his person; he experienced each of these successively and exclusively. Thus, when undergoing training in Islam, Ramakrishna is known to have suspended visits to the Kali temple and eaten food cooked in the 'Muslim way'.[67] His universalism, in other words, was not the abstracted essence of common religious truths, nor a synthetic fusion of selected ideas or practices. Also, the path that he chose to experience every religious tradition was not contemplative thought but active *sadhana* (spiritual quest). To put it simply, Ramakrishna believed that each religious tradition was bounded by a set of distinctive ideas, beliefs, or practices and that these boundaries could not be stretched at will. That Tagore misunderstood the vital content of Ramakrishna's religious life seems to run counter to the fact that the two also shared certain important metaphysical ideas. There is, for instance, the same sense of surrender before God's will, impatience with philosophical quibbling, the argument that activism cannot be an end in itself, the idea of God and man tied in reciprocal love, and, finally, agreement on different paths leading to the same spiritual goal. Whereas Rabindranath somewhat misunderstood the religious life and ideas of Sri Ramakrishna,[68]

[65] Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 4, p. 50.

[66] 'Ramakrishna Paramahamsa' (1935); reproduced in EW, vol. 3, p. 955.

[67] Sen, *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times.*

[68] A scholar has drawn attention to the controversy that broke out in 1911 when Tagore in the essay 'Rup o Arup' (*Sanchay*) somewhat disapprovingly referred to Ramakrishna's locating *Sakti* symbolism in the

he chose to say very little on that of Vivekananda. Of late, there have been works that have drawn attention to Vivekananda's rendering of several Tagore songs on festive occasions and even to occasional meetings between the two but no serious comparative study of their religious or philosophical views.[69] This, again, is intriguing, especially given the fact that both drew heavily upon the Upanishads and the Vedanta, shared a deep-rooted personal quest to experience the Infinite, emphasized the spiritual potentiality in man, revealed a deep-rooted humanism, produced a sharp critique of contemporary Hinduism, and placed great emphasis on selfless service and a reassuring belief in the moral virtuosity in man. In hindsight, it would seem as though what discomfited Rabindranath and the Tagore family more generally is Vivekananda's status as a sanyasi, his unflinching veneration of the idol-worshipping Ramakrishna as guru, and possibly also his increasing public identification with an aggressive Hindu nationalism and cultural self-assertion. William Radice has even suggested, though not very convincingly, that Tagore and Visva-Bharati might have felt threatened by the legacy of Vivekananda and his success with institution-building.[70]

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figure of the lion. The well-known playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh and a lay disciple of Ramakrishna sharply reacted to what he considered to be a slighting of his guru and the creative use of symbolism. See Parthasarathi Chattopadhyay, *Rabindra Vivekananda Samparka* (Calcutta: Nath Publishing, 2013), pp. 119–20. Tagore's essay is reproduced in RR, vol. 9, p. 525.

[69] Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 2, p. 94 and vol. 4, pp. 50, 229; Chattopadhyay, *Rabindra Vivekananda Samparka*; Aditya Prasad Majumdar, *Chintanayak Rabindranath o Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishers, 1974); and Kaushik Chakravarti, 'Rabindranath Vivekananda Samparka: Anwita Sattwar Sandhane', *The West Bengal Political Science Review*, vol. XIV, no. 1, (January–June 2011), pp. 152–8.

[70] William Radice, 'Atheists, Gurus and Fanatics: Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1916)', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2000),

Religion and Rabindranath: Commentary on the Selections

It is customary to understand the evolution of Tagore's religious or philosophical thought within a chronological framework. Admittedly, this does help in identifying important points of transition. There is, however, no visible consensus on just how this framework might be best devised. Critics like Abu Syed Ayub do not engage with the religious life or thought of the young Rabindranath even as their reading of works like the *Naibedya* (1901), *Gitanjali* (1910), or what was to follow remains extremely perceptive. Others, who do pay some attention to the early Rabindranath, cannot agree on just where to begin. Thus, whereas Sukumari Bhattacharya thinks that with Tagore an intense concern with God and religion arrived with *Kabikahini* (1878),[71] Satyendranath Roy finds this to occur with *Naibedya*[72] and Bhavatosh Dutta with the anthology *Kheya* (1906).[73] Second, the progression from one identifiable phase to another is not always linear or unequivocal. Thus, Tagore's so-called 'Orientalist' phase does give way to a pro-Westernizing one,[74] only to relapse into culturally nostalgic and conservative moods, fanned by the Swadeshi years. In all this there also remains an element of personal history. Tagore lost as many as four close relatives in the space of about five years: his wife Mrinlaini Devi in 1902, daughter Renuka in 1903, father Maharshi Debendranath in 1905, and

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p. 422. In the same essay, Radice initially gives us to believe that the character Lilananda Swami in the novel *Chaturanga* was modelled on Ramakrishna but later has reason to change his mind.

[71] Sukumari Bhattacharya, *Some Thoughts on Tagore* (Calcutta: Draupadi, 2003), p. 1.

[72] Roy, *Rabindranather Chintajagat*, 'Introduction', p. 7.

[73] Dutta, *Bangali Manashe Vedanta*, p. 101.

[74] A change noted by Sarkar in *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*, pp. 160–1.

younger son Shamindranath in 1907. It is not improbable that the deep introspection and strong sense of self-surrender that characterizes the *Gitanjali* phase may have been hastened by such tragic personal loss.

Sharp differences also surface over whether a sense of the 'religious' persisted with Tagore even in later life. Sukumari Bhattacharya argues that this ceased after *Geetali* (1914)[75] and allegedly by the time the poet produced the anthology *Patraput* (1936), God had all but faded out. It has been suggested that at this stage man was perceived as the sole moral agent, no longer answerable to God since there was really no God to answer to.[76] Elsewhere, this line of argument has been fortified with the claim that Tagore's religious life was characterized by 'scepticism' in the early years and 'grand agnosticism', thereafter progressively turning theology into anthropology.[77] This leaves us guessing as to whether Tagore, at any identifiable stage in his life, at all positively related to God and religion. Such arguments, however, are not hard to contest, especially given Tagore's continuing quest for the sacred. Even allowing for a growing dissatisfaction with contemporary religious life, this does not ever appear to have projected God to be a purely mental construction and religion as mere strategy, synthetically devised to meet human contingencies. If anything, his endeavour was to further humanize God and bring out the spiritual potential in men. Anthropocentrism and not anthropomorphism is perhaps a better description of the nature of this enterprise. Though otherwise critical of renunciation (*tyag*) or of detachment (bairagya), Tagore also seems to have been personally attracted to these. In 1928, after a meeting with

[75] Bhattacharya, *Some Thoughts on Tagore.*

[76] Ibid.

[77] P.K. Roy, 'The Boundless Infinite: Tagore's Ideas Concerning Religious Consciousness and Life-Worlds', in T.S. Rukmani (ed.), *Religious Consciousness and Life Worlds* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study [IIAS], 1988), pp. 185, 188.

Sri Aurobindo, he came to express a longing for a life of spiritual solitude. 'Having met Aurobindo at Pondicherry,' he wrote to his daughter-in-law Protima Devi, 'I felt that I too desperately needed a course in private meditation (*tapasya*).'[78] In 1931, writing to Hemantabala Devi, he confessed that there remained in him as much the Saiva mendicant as the world-affirming Vaishnav aesthete.[79] In 1935, when supporting the indefinite fast undertaken by Pandit Ramchandra Sharma in protest against animal sacrifice at the Kalighat temple in Calcutta, it is God that he personally and reverently invoked for the man's well-being.[80] Syed Mujtaba Ali, a student at Santiniketan in the early 1920s, and who observed Rabindranath at close quarters, records the poet's daily routine of *upasana* (prayer sessions) beginning at dawn and lasting for about two hours.[81] Mujtaba Ali also refers to the rather enigmatic poem that the poet wrote (on 30 July 1941), only about a week before his death. The poem carries a tantalizing reference to a Creatrix who was both the source of delusion (*cholanamoyee*) and the Benign Grace that freed man of all delusion. Now while the metaphor may well be understandable in the light of Sankhya

[78] Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Protima Devi, dated 30 May 1928; reproduced in *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1942), p. 60. Translation mine.

[79] Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, dated May 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, eds Kanai Samanta and Abhijit Sen (revised and enlarged edition) (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1997), vol. 9, p. 33.

[80] '... I have nothing to say but to send up earnest prayers to God Almighty to so ordain things that the door for avoiding the grim tragedy may not be irrevocably banged yet.' 'Ramchandra Sharma Undertakes Fast: Tagore's Appeal' (1935); reproduced in EW, vol. 3, p. 811.

[81] Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Gurudev o Santiniketan* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 2011 [14th reprint]), p. 12. This could be said to go back to his early years when he practised early morning upasana under the supervision of Debendranath.

philosophy as Mujtaba Ali suggests,[82] I was also struck by the uncanny resemblance that the idea has to the theistic vision of Sri Ramakrishna who believed that Maya as the dynamic Feminine Principle represented both bondage (as *avidyamaya*) and liberation (as *vidyamaya*).[83] In Nirad C. Chaudhuri's view (citing Indira Devi Chaudhurani in support), Rabindranath believed in life after death. Reportedly, it was in that future life that he hoped to find release from the bitterness and hostility that he often faced from several contemporaries and the despondency and the pain caused by repeated bereavement that he suffered in adult life.[84]

Identifying distinct phases in Tagore's religious life and thought would also appear to be somewhat determined by the heuristic approach that scholars and critics have adopted. We have earlier noted the historian Susobhan Sarkar's identifying an 'Orientalist' phase in Rabindranath (in his view, between 1882 and 1885) as also one that is preponderantly on the side of 'Westernism' (between 1888 and 1898).[85] David Kopf, also a cultural historian of modern Bengal, detects a fiercely 'anti-Westernizer' phase between 1898 and 1906.[86] Such attention to passing cultural or intellectual moods helps us to better contextualize Tagore. By comparison, the time structures adopted by literary critics are often flatter and historically less nuanced. At times, they also look somewhat arbitrary. Satyendranath Roy,

[82] Mujtaba Ali, *Gurudev o Santiniketan*, pp. 31, 32–3.

[83] For relevant excerpts available in English translation, see Sen, *His Words*, pp. 82–5.

[84] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Atmaghati Rabindranath*, 2 vols (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 2012), p. 115. Rabindranath reportedly told the British Unitarian Stapford Brook that life after death was possible. See Birendra Kumar Ghosh, *Dharmapathik Rabindranath* (Calcutta: Bookland Private Ltd, 1961), pp. 171–2.

[85] Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays.*

[86] David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 293.

for instance, takes the years 1914 to 1929 (16 years in all) as representing a distinct phase in the evolution of Rabindranath's religious thought. Ideally, this could have been stretched to 1930, climaxing in the Hibbert Lectures of 1930. But that apart, how safe is it to assume that Tagore's attempts to fertilize mainstream Hindu religious thought with the use of folk religion of the Bauls and nirguni sants (as in his 'The Religion of Man' or elsewhere) does not have older roots?[87] A second instance occurs with the poems in *Naibedya* which are taken to mark an important advancement in Tagore's ideas of intense, personalized bhakti. Allowing for some exceptions, critics fail to note how, in some cases, they also produce a historically and culturally determined reading of older texts that were originally free of such values. In *Naibedya*, Rabindranath inserts into his reading of Upanishadic verses a palpable patriotism and culturally anxious sentiments about reviving a supine and unenergetic India.[88] This period, in fact, also coincides with one of the more socially conservative phases in Tagore when he was keen to conserve and propagate traditional Hindu values and practices as, say, in the running of the newly founded school at Santiniketan.[89] By

[87] Tagore first heard Kabir's songs at the age of 11 when visiting the Golden Temple at Amritsar in the company of his father. A Nanak bhajan (*Gagana thale robi chandra deepak jole*) was rendered into Brahma sangit. The latter is reproduced in *Geetabitan* (Puja o Prarthana #1) (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1973).

[88] Abu Syed notes his fairly contrived rendering of *Sweteswatar Upanishad*, 2.21. Abu Syed Ayub, *Adhunikta o Rabindranath*, p. 78. For comparable examples, see *Naibedya*, Poems #60, 63. Poem #64 is distinctly anti-colonial in tone and disenchanted with Western 'materialism'.

[89] On 13 November 1902, Tagore wrote to an employee at Santiniketan, Kunjalal Ghosh, recommending that a Brahmin student be made to serve food at the school hostel. A few days later, on 5 December 1902, he wrote to Manoranjan Bandopadhyay, a teacher at the Santiniketan school, with instructions to observe and encourage such social practices as were acceptable to Hindu society. This letter also recommends that

comparison, works like *Gitanjali-Geetimalya-Geetali* hardly reflect any contemporary social and political concerns. Over the years, Rabindranath's anxieties regarding religion only deepened in the light of certain historical and political developments: assertive religious identities and the outbreak of communal violence, militarism, the gathering clouds of war, and extreme forms of nationalism. There is indeed some faith and hope in his writings of the 1930s but more disenchantment and cynicism.

In hindsight, it does seem equally useful to focus on the continuities of religious/philosophical values and ideas in Rabindranath Tagore as on discernible changes. A good part of what he spoke or wrote on religion and philosophy was rooted in contemporary Hindu thought and, quite naturally, has to be understood in that context. This, however, does not take away from his originality; the poetic genius of Tagore could conceptualize and express ideas in a manner and with an intuitive depth that few of his contemporaries could match. The *Gitanjali*, notwithstanding its professed and highly personalized religiosity, moved even an atheist like Abu Syed Ayub. Scholarly speculation on the exact meaning or relevance of Tagore's concept of Jeebondebata has not been exhausted even in nearly a century after it was concretely expressed.

For the convenience of the reader, excerpts included in the three parts of this book are broadly classified into three categories:

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a distinction be made in the manner in which students could greet a Brahmin and a non-Brahmin teacher respectively: the former, by touching his feet and the latter with folded hands. See Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1992), vol. 13, pp. 11, 166–7. This is worth contrasting to Rabindranath's views expressed soon after he became secretary to the Adi Brahmo Samaj (1889), that non-Brahmins too be allowed to serve as minister. See Rabindranath Tagore, *Jeebonsmriti*, RR, vol. 9, p. 446. Around 1911–12, he was also to invite the Kayastha Krishna Kumar Mitra to the pulpit of the Adi Samaj, much to the displeasure of older and more orthodox members.

essays and miscellaneous writings; discourses, public addresses, and informal talks; and letters. Excerpts included under each category are also arranged chronologically, since a thematic arrangement looked less feasible in view of several ideas or arguments being expressed in a particular address or essay. I would have to also admit that this is but a synthetic classification. Many sermons and addresses, I imagine, would have been preceded by written drafts and some essays followed from informal talks or formal addresses. Both in bulk and in conceptual depth, the several sermons/addresses collectively called *Santiniketan* perhaps constitute the most important part of Tagore's religious thinking as available to us in prose. They are, however, not as well known, largely because they are not available in translation. These lectures spanned over a long period, ranging from 1908 to early 1915, but of the 152 sermons that make up this work, as many as 104 were written in a relatively short span of time, between Aghrayan 1315 BS and Baisakh 1316 (between November–December 1908 and April–May 1909). About half of the addresses included in Part II under 'Sermons' are from *Santiniketan.* Other important addresses to be excerpted in the same category are the Kamala Lectures delivered in 1933 titled 'Manusher Dharma' and its sequel delivered in Santiniketan the same year called 'Manav Satya'. Under 'Essays and Miscellaneous Writings', I have included selected writings from the following collections, now a part of Tagore's Collected Works: *Alochana, Samalochana, Samaj, Dharma, Adhunik Sahitya, Sanchay,* and *Kalantar.* Also included in this section are book reviews and other writings not included in the Collected Works. All such writings cover the period between 1884 and 1925. The section titled 'Letters' include short but highly significant excerpts, about 24 in all, and mostly addressed to Tagore's niece, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, and Hemantabala Devi, daughter of Brajendrakishore Roychaudhuri of Gouripore, Mymensing. What is expressed elsewhere in erudite prose flows

here as spontaneous feeling. The letters included in this collection stretch between the years 1893 and 1937.

The excerpts included in this collection are mainly related to three important themes: the critique of contemporary Hinduism, conceptions of God and religion, and ethical activism. Of these, the second is perhaps where we find Rabindranath to be the most original. There is, however, a cluster of miscellaneous writings or speeches unrelated to such issues. One of these concerns the debate and dissension that took place within the Brahmo community over the question of identity. Even in the post-Swadeshi years, when his thought had grown more universalistic, Rabindranath maintained that notwithstanding any doctrinal differences between them, Brahmos could legitimately count themselves among Hindus.

The Critique of Contemporary Hinduism

With Tagore, a critical approach to contemporary Hindu social and religious practices, as we have noted, begins by the 1880s. A part of this, it must be admitted, had already been anticipated in the writings of Rammohun, Akshay Dutt, and the Maharshi himself. Thus, by the 1840s, there existed a critique of image worship or the blind reverence shown to scripture, a strong moral striving for Truth, and an engaging commitment to human welfare. Though generally taken to be a conservative figure, the Maharshi himself was quick to depart from certain customary beliefs and practices known in contemporary Hinduism. In 1842, it was he who categorically rejected *avatarvad* (belief in Hindu avatars) which he found Pandit Ramchandra Vidyabagish (1786–1845) preaching from the Brahmo pulpit. It was again he who made the chanting of Vedic hymns public, as contrasted to the practices known to exist in Rammohun's time. Other than Ramakrishna, *vyakulata*, an intense pining for God realization, is best identified

with the Maharshi and which perhaps left the most visible mark on his youngest son, Rabindranath.

A practice that Rabindranath consistently critiqued was the use of religious symbols and images in Hindu worship. This has a pre-history. Sometime in the year 1859 (?), with Debendranath refusing to go along with daily religious services rendered to the family deity, the Tagore family was forced to split. Jogmaya Devi, widow of Girindranath, Debendranath's younger brother, continued to observe all Hindu festivals and traditions which were strictly forbidden by Debendranath in his own family.[90] The Maharshi's second son, Satyendranath, testifies to the fierce iconoclasm that characterized this family, even adding to it the incident of his once angrily desecrating an image of the goddess Saraswati.[91] On the issue of image worship, Rabindranath was first drawn into public controversy with his article 'Sakar o Nirakar Upasana' published in the journal *Bharati*, Sravan 1292 BS/July–August 1885. This at once drew angry protest from one Gobinda Lal Dutta (*Bharati*, Aswin 1292 BS/September–October 1885). The controversy was revived in 1898 with Rabindranath reviewing the work *Sakar o Nirakar Tattwa* by Jatindramohan Singha (1898), excerpted in Part I (Essay #6). Interpreting Sakta literature and symbolism in his *Batayaniker Potro* (1919) drew him into an extended controversy with one Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay who produced two rejoinders in quick succession, published in *Bharatvarsha* in Bhadra 1326 BS/August–September 1919 and Phalgun 1326 BS/February–March 1919, respectively. Rabindranath replied to the first of these essays in 'Saktipuja', *Probasi*, Kartik 1326 BS/October–November 1919, later included in the collection *Kalantar* and excerpted in Part I (Essay #13). The second, he chose to ignore. Tagore's objections to the use

[90] Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 1, p. 21.

[91] Satyendranath Tagore, *Amar Balyakatha o Bombai Probas*, p. 52. He goes on to add, partly in jest no doubt, how that act of desecration cost him a possible elevation to the rank of a High Court Judge.

of religious images and symbols are scattered in his copious correspondence but perhaps more sharply in his exchange of letters with Hemantabala Devi (Letter #11).

In hindsight, Rabindranath's objections to *sakar upasana* (worship of divinity with a form) echo certain ideas or arguments already known in Hindu discourse. What possibly added some bitterness to the controversy is the way image worship had come to be supported, albeit within an overarching framework of religious pluralism, by saints like Sri Ramakrishna and subsequently valorized by Hindu missionaries and publicists. Tagore's own position on this issue is best summarized in a letter he wrote in 1912:

> I have nothing against the worship of images per se. So long as one does not hold the presence of God to be exclusive to a particular form or image, there would be no problem. I see nothing wrong in privately relating to God with the aid of some symbol. On the other hand, controversy is bound to erupt once we resort to grossly irrational practices. Celebrating the marriage of God, attempts to feed Him or administering some medication are but fanciful acts, a child's play. One does not really need to feed or clothe God; where this might be truly required is in the world of living men and women. God accepts our offerings only when thus bestowed.[92]

Apparently, Rabindranath did not subscribe to the Hindu-Brahmanical theory of *adhikarbhed*, which allowed for a differentiated system of rights or capabilities in keeping with the social, ritual, or intellectual standing of an individual. However, in the eyes of many Hindus, not allowing for this made the worship of a formless God look grossly unrealistic. They would have agreed with Tagore's claim that *nirakar upasana* too was permitted within Hinduism but this was not for just everyone to carry out. On 1 October 1884, in the presence of Sri Ramakrishna, Jogendra

[92] Letter of 5 Chaitra 1318 BS/March 1912. Originally appeared in *Probashi* of Magh 1334 BS/January–February 1928; reproduced in Ghosh, *Rabindranather Dharmachinta*, pp. 109–10. Translation mine.

Chandra Basu (1854–1905), the editor of the conservative Bengali daily *Bangabasi*, plainly ridiculed the idea of a 12-year-old meditating upon a formless God. From Basu's testimony, however, it would also appear as though the Adi Brahmo Samaj, of which Tagore was an important spokesman and functionary, took a more flexible approach on this question. 'Members of the Adi Samaj,' Basu observed, 'may be expected to visit respectable Hindu homes on the occasion of religious festivities.'[93] If true, such claims would project Rabindranath's views as something of an exception. Importantly, Ramakrishna himself ended the conversation by ruling that it was necessary that one equally acknowledged the *sakar* and the nirakar.

On God and Religion

Evidently, Tagore's disapproval of certain aspects of contemporary Hindu thought and practice originating in certain conceptions of God and religion that were in some ways dissenting, if not wholly different. It has been argued that in good measure Rabindranath's religiosity was derived from that of his father, the Maharshi Debendranath Tagore.[94] Though not unfounded, this view does tend to overlook some palpable differences that remained between the two. Even allowing for Ajit Kumar Chakravarti's claim that the Maharshi progressively toned down his philosophical dualism, as, say, between his *Atmatattwavidya* (1850–1) and *Brahmodharmer Mot o Biswas* (1859–60),[95] he was never as comfortable as was his son with Vedantic non-dualism. The Maharshi was appalled at mortals claiming identity with Brahman (*aham brahmasmi*) and squarely blamed Acharya Sankar

[93] Ma (Mahendranath Gupta), *Sri Sri Ramakrishnakathamrita*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Kathamrita Bhavan, 1961 [reprint]), p. 193.

[94] Chaudhuri, *Atmaghati Rabindranath*, p. 119.

[95] Chakravarti, *Maharshi Debendranath Thakur*, p. 560.

for propagating such 'blasphemous' ideas.[96] Rabindranath, apparently, had none of the horror that the Maharshi (or more generally, the Vaishnavs) had of advaita, primarily because he desisted from thinking in terms of binaries: dual and non-dual, *saguna* and nirguna, *pravritti* and *nivritti*, sakar and nirakar, the finite and the infinite. Such binaries, as he has claimed at several places, suggest limitations within what must by its very definition be Unlimited. One way of glossing over these binaries was the use of love since it was in love that these seemingly opposed categories lost all oppositional qualities (see Essay #5, Letter #3). Second, when compared to his father, Rabindranath was more explicit in asserting that man was not merely a social entity but also a spiritual being possessed of a soul (Discourse #1).[97] At some stage in his religious life, the prospects of *nirvana mukti* (dissolution of all identity) posited in the Upanishads frightened the Maharshi into modifying his earlier belief in the soul progressing interminably (*ananta unnati*).[98] Rabindranath, by comparison, seems to have retained a more consistent faith in atman-oriented philosophy. 'There could be no other freedom except for the freedom of the soul', he wrote to the literary critic Dinesh Chandra Sen in 1906.[99] Third, father and son appear to have looked at the problem of sin in perceptively different ways. After the publication of *Gitanjali*, one of the recurring criticisms to appear in the Western press was Tagore's allegedly overlooking the problem of sin.[100] Like

[96] *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, p. 112.

[97] See also his *Sadhana* (1913), EW, vol. 2, pp. 292, 341; *Creative Unity* (1922), EW, vol. 2, p. 543.

[98] *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, p. 87.

[99] Letter of April 1906; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 10 (Calcutta, 1967), p. 34. Translation mine.

[100] A typical example is the allegation appearing in W.S. Urquhart, 'The Philosophical Inheritance of Rabindranath Tagore', *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 26, no. 3 (April 1916), pp. 411, 413.

the Maharshi, Rabindranath believed that man had to own up for his acts:[101] a particular verse in *Naibedya* (#70) even seeks divine retribution for those who perpetrated unjust acts as also those who put up with these. However, in a manner reminiscent of Sri Ramakrishna, Tagore also dismisses the preoccupation with man's 'innate' capacity for sin. Sinfulness, as he saw it, was easily overcome by revelling in the Bliss (*ananda*) of God (Essays #6, 7). Fourth, the Maharshi's was essentially a Semitic-cosmological argument: a Creator God created the world out of nothing. Rabindranath, by comparison, borrows both the Upanishadic idea of ananda (*Taitteriya Upanishad*) and the Vaishnav idea of creation being some inscrutable aesthetic sport (leela) producing aesthetic joy (rasa). In the latter view, creation was tantamount to the Absolute and the Infinite voluntary limiting Himself for the sake of man (Essay #3). To both Debendranath and Rabindranath, the world was a gift from God and this they appear to have derived from their reading of the opening verse of the *Isopanishad.* In Rabindranath, however, aesthetic enjoyment of the world could be supported by a perennial quest for *shanta, shivam, advaitam* (the Serene, the Auspicious, and the Absolute) concepts crystallizing in the Upanishads and yet fortified by the sensuality of Vaishnav poetry.[102] Indeed, as Rabindranath was to write to the philosopher Brajendra Nath Seal, much of his religiosity had been determined by the coalescence of Upanishadic and Vaishnav literature.[103] Fifth, the Maharshi and his youngest son differed over the nature and functions of yoga. Whereas the former thought that it was only the yogi who could perceive God in every possible aspect,[104]

[101] Chakravarti, *Maharshi Debendranath Tagore*, p. 560.

[102] This is an expression that he also employs in a poem of 1903 to describe the quintessential identity of India. See *Utsraga* (1914); reproduced in RR, vol. 5, p. 103 (#29).

[103] Letter dated 14 Kartik 1324 BS/October–November 1917, cited in Roy, *Rabindranather Chinta Jagat*, p. 67.

[104] *Maharshi Debendranath Thakurer Atmajeeboni*, p. 77.

the latter was prepared to admit yoga as a psychological experience but not as religion (Discourse #14, Essay #6).[105]

One of the most creative, if also enigmatic, conceptions that Tagore speaks of in relation to his spiritual life is that of Jeebondebata. This is a concept which critics and commentators have understood and interpreted differently. Thus, Naravane and Taraknath Ghosh have declined to accept this as a metaphysical concept, interpreting it more literally as the 'deity of life', perhaps more concretely as the spirit that animates life.[106] Others have understood this as a category that Rabindranath employed to reconcile his metaphysical quest with the emotional and the aesthetic and as a new way of locating an imminent God in man.[107] More recently, Rajat Kanta Ray has put together an anthology of Tagore's writings related to the concept of Jeebondebata. Ray's short but insightful introduction lays claim to Rabindranath's often envisioning this 'deity' in feminine form, from which he comes to the interesting conclusion that the concept may have some foundation in life-histories. In Ray's view, this feminine form could have been one of the three women who cast the greatest influence on Tagore's life: his wife Mrinalini Devi, his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi, and the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo.[108] Ray also alludes to Rabindranath often conceptualizing Jeebondebata as a

[105] Also see his 'The Religion of Man', Hibbert Lectures for 1930, EW, vol. 3, p. 133.

[106] Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought*, p. 142; and Ghosh, *Rabindranather Dharmachinta*, p. 69.

[107] Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005 [reprint]), p. 52; and Harendra Prasad Sinha, *Religious Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and Radhakrishnan: A Comparative and Analytical Study* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994 [reprint]), p. 27.

[108] Ray, *Jeebondebata*, 'Introduction', pp. 13–15. Ray informs us that whereas the word 'Jeebondebata' is feminine in Sanskrit, it is both masculine and feminine in the Bengali language which may explain why the poet's vision is not consistently that of a woman.

boatman who ferries a man across the river of life. Such a metaphor I have found to appear as early as 1910 (*Gitanjali* #140).

From Tagore's own writings on the subject (and these are not many), it would appear as though he grafted upon a metaphysical concept, something that was deeply personal. That sadhana had to be an ongoing and intensely personal striving is also hinted at in an address Rabindranath delivered in 1907[109] and repeated elsewhere (*Geetali* #37; Discourses #2, 7, 8, 13, 15). Critics like Naravane also appear to be unaware of the concept of *Viswadebata* (Lord of the Universe) that Tagore also alludes to. In Tagore's view, the concepts of Jeebondebata and Viswadebata were different yet integrally related. The former represented concrete personality, the latter the abstract universal but these were also joined to one another inasmuch as an individual was both a concrete personality and a part of the larger whole. God, in this view was manifest at three different levels: the supra-sensory, in worldly life, and exclusively in the individual person. It was Jeebondebata, Tagore suggests, that concretized the impersonal bliss of God into something tangibly personal.

The letters from Rabindranath Tagore to several correspondents included in this collection express unfeigned indignation at certain Hindu beliefs and practices. What is often subtle philosophical argument in essays or sermons now acquires the quality of an engaging directness. It pained Tagore to think that God who represented Truth and beatitude should remain trapped in dark and dirty dungeons that went by the name of temples, that a countless number of hapless animals should be regularly sacrificed before deities (Letters #19, 20), or that people should seek to gratify lifeless icons and greedy gurus rather than honour the living god who went about unfed and unclothed on the streets

[109] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Mahapurush', address delivered at a commemoration meeting in honour of Debendranath Tagore; reproduced in RR, vol. 2, p. 805.

(Letters #10, 12).[110] Religious dogmatism and self-righteousness was equally unacceptable to him. In a manner reminiscent of Sri Ramakrishna, Tagore gives us to believe that even allowing for the unity of objectives (God-realization), there had to be the choice of paths (Discourse #2; Essay #1). Attempts to convert people from one religion to another he found unreasonable and disturbing (Discourse #10). Once on board a ship, he was irritated by persistent evangelist propaganda and persuaded to protest: 'The very name of God is made hateful when it is preached with the accompaniment of intolerable pride of creed and sect and moral preaching comes to us as an insult when divested of love and charity', he wrote to the editor of the *Pioneer*.[111] However, Hindu superstition equally upset him: in his exchange of letters with Hemantabala Devi, Tagore expresses his impatience with a belief in astrology (Letter #15) and like Bankim before him, he contests orthodox claims about religions being founded on some scrupulous regard for food and drink (Essay #4). Interestingly enough, he found science to be consistent with faith: 'To accept science and history in their own domains is a part of accepting Him,' he wrote on 23 December 1937 to Hemantabala Devi, 'Anti-science is atheism because God's own creation is founded on science' (Letter #23). In part, this is a return to the Natural Religion of Akshay Dutta and perhaps it would be only befitting to acknowledge here the parallelism that his contemporary Vivekananda also draws between the methods of science and the yogic route to the

[110] This virtually replicates Vivekananda's criticism of temple culture: '... millions of rupees have been spent only so that the temple doors at Varanasi and Vrindavan may play at opening and shutting all day long ... now the Lord is having his toilet, now he is taking his meals ... all this while the living god is dying for the want of food, for the want of education'. Cited in Amiya P. Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

[111] Letter to the Editor of *Pioneer*, 17 November 1913, cited in Pal, *Robi Jeeboni*, vol. 6, p. 409.

attainment of moksha.[112] On the whole, Rabindranath's enterprise was not to debunk religion per se but to arrive at a more sophisticated conception. 'Religion has always elevated those who tried to refine religion itself,' he wrote in 1910, 'but the Hindu insists that we devise a commonplace religion that would better meet the requirements of women and common people. In so doing, they have allowed the natural intelligence and aspirations of the entire country to be weighed down by crudeness.'[113] For Rabindranath, God was not some supra-mental Being that could be reduced to commonplace life but at the root of the highest and the best in man: he represented values that man always aspired for but never fully attained. God was not simply the sum total of all that there was in the universe; His value unquestionably exceeded it.[114]

In Search of Man

By common consent, the quality that separates the early Tagore from the writer and thinker in his mature years is the attempt to make man the measure of things. Arguably, such thoughts are already manifest in the *Gitanjali* phase and soon thereafter, as when he locates God not as some lifeless icon trapped within temple walls but actively amidst humanity: among toiling workers[115] or in a child's innocent and joyful play ('God watches children at play and forgets the priest').[116] In Rabindranath's

[112] For a critical discussion on this theme, see Anantanand Rambachan, 'Swami Vivekananda's Use of Science as an Analogy for the Attainment of Moksha', *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 40, no. 3 (July 1990), pp. 331–42.

[113] Letter from Rabindranath Tagore dated 20 Ashad 1317; reproduced in *Probashi*, Pous 1334 BS/January–February 1928 and cited in Ghosh, *Rabindranather Dharmachinta*, p. 109.

[114] Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Religion of Man', EW, vol. 3, pp. 109, 172.

[115] *Gitanjali*, RR, vol. 6, song #119.

[116] *Fireflies*, EW, vol. 1, no. 17.

writings leading up to the *Gitanjali-Geetimalya-Geetali* trilogy, as one critic has perceptively noted, the importance of man was derived essentially from the reciprocal needs of God and man and from envisioning creation as a divine sport. By the time he published *Patraput*, this worship has shifted from the world of gods to that of man and found a deep interiority (*maner manush*: the man of my heart) in the very being and essence of Man. By this time, too, God is not so much the Cosmic Being (*Viswabidhata*), or even the intimate companion (*paran shakha*) of exquisite and quasi-mystical love poetry but a deep-rooted Consciousness, the datum of all human experiences which finds fulfilment in man. Even though it was not man who created the world but it was he who gave it meaning and value. But for man, as Tagore might have said, creation itself would have no value.[117]

A man-centred discourse did not originate with Tagore. A joining of religion with a new concern for man was visible in modern Bengal by the 1840s. Kissory Chand Mitra (1822–1873), a well-known Derozian, founded the Theophilanthropic Society (1843) which tried to employ religion in the service of man. The society aimed at promoting 'moral and religious culture, irrespective of any revealed form and only by the study of the doctrines of man as revealed by his constitution and the power, wisdom and goodness of God as manifest in nature'.[118] Over time, this also came to be joined to an urge to make religion yield a measure of human happiness. Gourmohan Das, a founder-member of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (1838), read a paper before the society in which he argued that the world had been created to further human happiness.[119] 'It is the universal desire to overcome unhappiness and to obtain happiness', observed Akshay Kumar Dutta in his celebrated *Bahya Bastur Sahit Manav Prakitir Vichar*

[117] Abu Syed Ayub, *Adhunikta o Rabindranath*, p. 162.
[118] Cited in Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal*, p. 22.
[119] Ibid., p. 5.

(1851).[120] Evidently, such thoughts had been modelled on George Combe's *The Constitution of Man* (1829) and, in the years to come, religion as an ordering principle in society found its exponents in several well-known Bengalis, chiefly in Bankimchandra and his contemporary, Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya (1840–1932). Quite significantly, Bankimchandra's *Dharmatattwa* opens with the question of how human unhappiness (*dukkha*) could be effectively overcome.

Tagore's writings, however, though generally in this humanistic mould, also appear to depart in two important respects. First, he lacks the eudaemonism in both Bankim and the Buddha. *Naibedya* (#69) expresses a willingness to accept the measure of pain and suffering that Providence may have in store for him; *Gitanjali* (#4) seeks from God the courage and fortitude to cope with all adversity; *Geetali* (#47) observes that fulfilment in life comes equally through suffering; in *Sadhana*, he finds no real opposition between life and death.[121] An essay of 1908 excerpted in this collection (Essay #9; also see Essay #5) hints at the emptiness of material contentment and argues instead that it is through the act of self-surrendering and penance that a man realized his soul in its deepest meaning.[122] Second, more than any other contemporary or near contemporary, Tagore seems to bring out the innate freedom and rebelliousness in man: 'I am able to love my God because He gives me the freedom to deny Him,' he says in *Fireflies* and again, 'God honoured me with his fight when I was rebellious; he ignored me when languid.'[123] Man is the only being,

[120] Cited in Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal*, p. 28. Translation mine.

[121] EW, vol. 2, p. 292.

[122] The standard handbook on Brahmoism subsequently put together by Satish Chakravarti reiterates this quite forcefully: 'Attempts to alleviate suffering does not constitute religion.' See Satishchandra Chakravarti, *Brahmodharma o Brahmosamaj* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1997 [reprint]), pp. 11, 14–15. Translation mine.

[123] *Fireflies*, EW, vol. 1, pp. 145 and 194, respectively.

as Tagore observed elsewhere, who was never fully reconciled to his status quo and that conflicts and contradictions only brought out the best in him. Religion, in this sense, was man's desire to be freed from the limitation of what is.[124] Mukti thus rendered, was not salvation but freedom of thought, of vision.

It may be reasonably claimed that it was through his interest in quotidian religious culture that Tagore found practical support for the innate rebelliousness in man. The religion of the Bauls (where incidentally he finds the concept of maner manush echoed), he admitted, gave him the vital clue to the inner meaning of all religion. They proved to him that religion was the most natural and simplest of ideals. Religion, ultimately, drew meaning and sustenance not from the cosmic God but the God of human personality. It was thus that the Infinite became defined in humanity; it was also thus that man began to represent the creator and began to truly comprehend the world. Transcendental Truth, observed Tagore, could not be derived by transcending God; every single experience had to originate and ultimately also end in man (see Discourses #14, 15).

The ethical and philosophical basis for Tagore's 'The Religion of Man' ultimately lies in his world-affirmation (Letter #21; Essay #3). The world as the source of all phenomenal experiences was man's greatest moral instructor; the world with its vibrant natural beauty was the greatest source of aesthetic fulfilment and the world as the site of all social relations made it possible for us to grow in personality. In modern Bengal, Rammohun was indeed the first thinker to attempt transforming transcendental Vedanta into a pragmatic social gospel. Rabindranath, on the other hand, attempted to elevate the phenomenal world to the status of a perceivable Truth and Reality. 'Even allowing for the "transitory" and "illusive" nature of the world,' he once observed, 'our emotions and sentiments had to be taken for real.... Even

[124] *Notes and Comments*, EW, vol. 4, pp. 281–2.

hoary Vedanta could not take away from a mother's feelings of loss or grief.'[125]

For someone who took the world to be real, human agency was naturally of utmost importance to Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore anticipates Gandhi in publicly valorizing work and the dignity of labour. In *Gitanjali* (#119), where, as we have noted, he locates God among toilers, there is also a reference to *Karma Yoga* which is construed essentially as productive and collective toil. On occasions though, his activism led him to make certain specious claims. At one place (Essay #4) he gives us to believe that in the Gita, Krishna upholds Karma Yoga to be the best of the paths available to man. In his day, such claims would have been hard to dispute. The Tagore family itself appears to have adhered to this line of thinking with Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925) translating Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* into Bengali in 1924. All the same, Rabindranath's claim looks dubious on at least three counts. First, the Gita is by its very nature eclectic and does not appear to privilege any one path over the other: that work was left to later day commentators. Second, the claim that the Gita leant on the side of karma may be easily offset by counter claims in favour of bhakti or *jnan* that have been made with equal persuasiveness. Only a few years earlier, Bankimchandra, who was otherwise on the side of moral activism, interpreted Gita in the light of bhakti. Second, even though he cited the Gita copiously, Rabindranath's appreciation of the Gita remained quite conflicted. In 1932, while on a flight to Iran here is what he thought of the work: 'The philosophy propagated by the *Gita* may well be compared to the flight of this soaring aircraft.... There are many such flying machines in the armoury of man which, built upon pure philosophical speculation, covers the real in obscurity....'[126]

[125] Tagore's letter to Indira Devi, dated 4 December 1895; reproduced in *Chinnapotraboli* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960), p. 341. Translation mine.

[126] Rabindranath Tagore, *Parasye* (1936); reproduced in RR, vol. 11, p. 629. Translation mine.

It remains unclear as to what Tagore identified as the 'philosophy' propagated by the Gita. In the least, he was trying to essentialize a work that does not easily lend itself to such essentialization. It also occurs to me that in his life and work, Rabindranath himself manifested all the three yogas.

I

ESSAYS AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS

1.

THE POWER OF UNIVERSAL LOVE*

... We have known certain poets who, in their literary careers, began by imitating other poets. They produced a lot of poetry, some extremely good. However, once we began hearing these, they appeared to have been set to a fixed tune. They were pleasant to the ears but lacked uniqueness or originality. Finally, after much wandering and groping in the dark, they suddenly discovered the depths of their own poetic talent. We marvelled at the songs that he now composed and the poet too was wonderstruck by the way he was able to give sublime expression to his feelings. The poet who has discovered his own language and is able to use it creatively is naturally a very happy person. There is such great delight in speaking one's own language; each word that the poet utters is like a child he has fathered. There is an apt example of this

* *Source*: 'Bauler Gaan' (The Song of the Baul), Rabindranath Tagore's review of the collection of songs called *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha.* First published in *Bharati*, Baisakh 1290 BS/April–May 1883 and included in the collection of essays titled *Samalochana* (1888); reproduced in RR, vol. 15, pp. 104–8.

at home. When Bankimchandra[1] produced his *Durgeshnandini*,[2] he had not truly discovered himself. The writing was good but it did not consistently carry the author's own music. At the time, if we had been given to understand that a gifted novelist has produced *Durgeshnandini* by translating or else by adapting from another novel, this would not have taken us by surprise. But the same cannot be said of his other works: *Bishbriksha*,[3] *Chandrashekhar*,[4] or other writings from his later years.

What is true of individuals also applies to communities. It occurs to us that we still have not been able to put our finger on the essential trait of the Bengalis.... Going through Bengali literature that is now available to us, it appears as though such literature is mostly inspired by English or other languages or at least that is likely to be the case. The main reason for this is that we still have not been able to capture the true essence of the Bengali language and culture. Scholars of Sanskrit will no doubt agree to this, accusing Bengali writers of neglecting the Sanskrit language. In reply, we could say that the language of neither the Sanskrit scholar nor of the English-educated is authentic Bengali. There is Bengali neither in Sanskrit grammar nor in the English. That language resides in the heart of the Bengalis....

[1] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), commonly rated as Bengal's first major novelist, also wrote several essays and treatises of which the *Dharmatattwa* (1888) and the *Krishnacharitra* (1886, 1892) are the best known. He contributed significantly to Hindu cultural revivalism in Bengal.

[2] Bankim's first novel, published in 1865, marked an important stage in the evolution of Bengali prose. Translated into English as *The Chieftain's Daughter* by Charuchandra Mokerjee in 1880.

[3] One of Bankim's best-known novels, published in 1873. Translated into English as *The Poison Tree* by Miriam S. Knight in 1884.

[4] Bankim's novel published in 1875. Translated into English by Manmathanath Roychaudhuri in 1904 and Debendra Chandra Mallik in 1905.

The more we try to put together that which truly represents the language, sensibility, or feelings of the Bengali people, the more the Bengali language will be benefited. It is for this reason that the publisher of this volume deserves the gratitude of all those who love and support the Bengali language....

High-sounding phrases like 'Universal Love' coming from foreigners sound pleasant and attractive to our ears but why do we fail to catch the same note that wandering beggars habitually keep singing at our doorsteps?

> Oh! come to us, brothers Jagai and Madhai,[5]
> come and join the rapturous singing in Lord's praise!
> the wicked have assaulted us and perhaps there is more to come
> but no matter, let us still bless you with the Lord's name,
> you have flung brick-bats at me but I nonetheless offer you my love,
> O come, brothers Jagai and Madhai.

The Baul may be heard to sing:

> In order to love, you must be prepared to die,
> the self-seeking can never know love.

One must prepare to die right at the beginning. There truly cannot be any love unless you give up yourself.

Another Baul song goes the following way:

> Only he who has killed his ego is spiritually perfect,
> virtues accrued over a billion past births are now with him.

and again:

> He who wagers his life only to wear the jewel of love,
> ceases to have any fear of death.

[5] Two miscreants of Nadia, West Bengal. They are believed to have been converted to Vaishnavism by Nityananda and Chaitanya through loving persuasion. This transformation of men, otherwise known to be wicked, into Vaishnavism is a recurring theme in Vaishnav songs and poetry.

He who has already given up his life can have no fear of death. Since he loves this world, he turns into the world itself. He is no longer the petty 'I' who may fear approaching death; he is the whole universe.

Indeed, one may ask, 'Of what use is this love?' This is like asking the flower what it possibly gains by spreading fragrance. The flower will no doubt reply that it could not but spread fragrance and that was in its very nature to do so. Likewise, the lover will say that his nature was to give up himself to the object of his love and that that was his only means to happiness:

> The greedy, driven only by selfishness, will no doubt wonder,
> could someone truly seek death for the sake of another?

To this the Baul replies:

> A man's work is determined by his nature,
> can the meaning of love ever dawn on one who does not love?

To the Baul there is but one instrument that produces music the world over:

> That magical, single-stringed instrument is with Gorachand,
> oh friend! it carries this entire universe
> on that single string, the string of love!

In that string, there is infinite energy at work; in an instant you may know anything that you need to know about this universe. You sit close to the person you love and the feelings from one heart keep flowing to the other all the time. If your heart is joined in love with the Universal Heart, it becomes possible to know everything about this world. Who else has been able to sing the glories of love in this manner?

Why can't we immerse ourselves in love for this world? This is because we are so anxious to retain our individuality. But the bonds of love surround this world and the world is constantly

trying to unite with you. It is not the wish of this ocean-like world that some streams detach themselves from it and flow out along some unchartered course. Rather, it desires that all streams keep flowing in unison, singing the same song. Only then is some synthesis possible in this world.... One who wishes to assert his individuality in opposition to the rest of the world cannot survive long....

But we have a quarrel with the publishers of this volume. Why did they have to include Brahmo songs and the compositions of the English-educated in it as well? In buying this book, our intention was not to hear the best songs; on the contrary, it was to capture the spontaneous outpourings of the untutored and innocent heart. There is a particular reason for saying this. People belonging to the class of the English-educated are all alike. Their education is similar and their hearts too are fashioned in the same mould. The modern English-educated poet echoes our own sentiments and this fails to excite us. On the other hand, when we discover ourselves in older literature, this is a matter of great wonder and delight to us. This is more exciting and delightful because therein we discover that our deepest feelings are not made to rest on some floating drift-wood which we may call modern but in the eternal heart of the Infinite Man. This restores our faith in ourselves....

2.
DHARMA*

Whether within living beings or the non-living, there is a Great Consciousness at work that progressively reveals Itself. Similarly, whether we speak of the saint or the sinner, there is within everybody the ideal of infinite virtue (*punya*) that keeps working all the time. The road to heaven is open for everybody; no one is denied of this. However, you may find that some have taken to the main thoroughfare, while others, either due to their own ignorance or a sense of curiosity, go into a bylane. Ultimately, however, after passing through several lanes and bylanes the latter are back
8 on the main road itself, even though the wandering would have added much to their weariness. All paths lead to the same destination, the only difference being that some of them are more circuitous than others.

Vice and Virtue

It is not as though there exists an entirely independent category which we may call vice or sins (*pap*). The sinner is not necessarily a man radically set apart from the virtuous; it is just that the virtuous possesses a few things that the sinner does not. The religious thinking of the sinner lacks a basis in consciousness and hence remains undeveloped. Sin represents lack, falsehood, and death. Hence, other than sin, everything else will continue

* *Source*: 'Dharma', first published in *Bharati*, Chaitra 1290 BS/ March–April 1884. Later included in the collection *Alochana* (1885); reproduced in RR, vol. 15, pp. 28–34.

to exist. Just as darkness gradually gives way to light, similarly, under the effects of consciousness, sin progressively turns to virtue (punya).

Consciousness

That which is eternal we may call dharma. It is because one can eternally take refuge in dharma that one may overcome the fear of death. It is within the framework of this eternal Truth that this world and all life within it are strung together as in a garland. All things on this earth, ranging from the smallest particle to that which is truly gigantic, are tied to one another in this fashion. It is thus that we are all connected through dharma. However, it may well be that some are conscious of this, while others are not. Without this pervading consciousness in us, we are bound to remain servile; the ties of consciousness, when active, lead to love.

The Nature of This World

Dharma requires that we consciously and willingly follow the eternal Truth that lies within Nature. That which protects and prevents injury is a shield, that which holds us together is dharma. What is the nature (dharma) of a particular object? It is the quality which is internal to that object and because of which that object becomes an object. What, then, is the nature of this world? That fixed and unmovable law on which this world rests is truly its nature. That is also the nature of every single particle that exists on this earth.

An Example

Let me illustrate my point with the aid of an example. One of the primary duties (dharma) in this world is concern for others. Selfishness is quite contrary to the nature of our worldly duties.

Whether you like it or not, you will be called upon to work for people other than yourself. In this world, every single atom exists for the sake of other atoms that are contiguous to it; no single atom can stay contented with itself.... If even one particle of sand were to be destroyed, this would lead to changes in the entire universe. A man acquires learning, thereby mentally advancing himself. But this can be a selfish act; little does he realize that there are millions of others who could equally lay claim to this learning. Irrespective of whether or not you impart this yourself, this stream of mental improvement will flow down to your children and flow on even beyond them. Everywhere around you there will arise the tides of progress. A man will one day depart from this world but his entire life and work has to be left behind for the sake of this world. Even after a man was dead and gone, not even a moment of his life can be lost to this world. The laws of nature are indeed so relentless and strict.

10

Impartiality

This world does not subject anyone to social ostracism and deny to him the services of a washer-man or barber as is otherwise done with an outcaste. The moon, the sun, rain, and all other natural forces continue to tirelessly serve the world. This is because what is naturally a part of this world cannot work in opposition to it. Sinners and deceitful people may indeed be likened to students of some junior class but the fact that they have sinned is not reason enough for us to drive them out of school. The horrors of hell as described in the Bible are really a false scare. It has been aptly said that sin is but the lack of something, nothing more. And this makes sin so very weak that one would never need some giant crusher to grind it to dust. The entire world continues to move against the idea of sin, day and night. Sin has indeed been transformed into virtue and self-contentment expanded into an awareness of the whole world.

Death

A man who has taken the refuge of dharma ceases to have any fear of death. Here, death does not mean annihilation or a radical change in condition. It is simply the absence of consciousness. This lack of consciousness is contrary to dharma. The more one relies on dharma, the more he gains in consciousness, the more he is led to meaningful experiences. That Grand Consciousness that has inspired all life on earth also flows through me, inundating me with that consciousness. Also, there is no likelihood of our comprehending this world through knowledge; it must be comprehended through consciousness.

Core Religion

Someone remarked that since there is cruelty in nature everywhere, there was nothing to prevent us from assuming that that indeed was the nature of this world. This charge is best answered by the very existence of the world. Our world would not have survived even for a moment if cruelty was to be its core principle and violence its very foundation. That which is readily visible on the surface is not dharma. On the surface we witness endless change all around but isn't changelessness the underlying principle of this world? All around us we find variety and difference but behind it all isn't there a pervading unity? If that were not so, this world would have been a mayhem of utter chaos and disorderliness, not the heavenly abode of Beauty. If that were not so, nothing could have been born and nothing would have survived.

An Allegory

There are many who see nothing but evil and inauspiciousness in this world. Going by this view, this world could not have survived even for a moment. Admittedly, there is all around us grief and despondency, pain and suffering. Even so, the music of this world

has not ceased to play. This is so because deep within the world-soul there resides bountiful Joy. That joyful light has not been extinguished so far; rather, all grief and despondency have been consumed by this luminous Joy. The world may be compared to (Lord) Siva. Siva, clad in darkness and in the company of millions and millions of spirits, is lost in the frenzied dance of dissolution (*tandava*). Lodged inside his throat is deadly poison, and yet he continues to dance. Venomous snakes adorn his body, and yet he continues to dance. He lives in the cremation ground, the site of death and deathliness, and yet he continues to dance. Kali, the very symbol of death, is eternally poised atop his chest, and yet there is no end to his Joy. Upon viewing the deadly serpents with their raised hoods and the bluish hue emanating out of the poison lodged in his body, we might be led to conclude that Siva is an unhappy person. On the other hand, do we not also hear within the matted hair the perennial stream of the holy Bhagirathi flow on with its joyous, gurgling sound? Do we really know the reason

behind Siva dancing away to the accompaniment of his subdued music and the beating of his drum (*damaru*)? Many take him to be a poor man but it is in his house that (goddess) Annapurna eternally resides providing food and sustenance to all. You may react to the sight of dust and grime on Siva's body, the ashes collected from the cremation ground, and the frightening signs of death everywhere. But these are only external signs; beneath the figure smeared with deathly ashes, do you not also find the indestructible silvery body, beautiful and shining as the moon? He is the conqueror of death (*mritunjaya*). And do we really know death? We have known death only in its frightening form, with its bared fangs and lolling tongue but that very death happens to be Siva's beloved. Holding death in an embrace, Siva remains seated in a state of ecstatic Joy. We really have no means of knowing the true form of the goddess Kali. To us, she appears only as death but the true devotee knows her to be no different from Gauri, the benign goddess. We have known Kali only as a forbidding

goddess but I trust a few would have also seen her enchanting form (*mohini-murti*). Everyone calls Siva a yogi but what is he meditating on when absorbed in a state of yoga?

3.

MUKTI*

... It does not stand to reason that liberation would come to us only outside human habitation, atop some distant Himalayan peak. Liberation essentially means freedom for the soul but this freedom is not negative. The more we expand our being and consciousness, the more the soul too extends its field of existence. The path to extend our consciousness is through love. Liberation comes not through annihilating the objects of love but by expanding our love even wider. Driven by our material

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's review of a short story by Nagendranath Gupta called 'Mukti' (Liberation). First appeared in *Sadhana*, Pous 1298 BS/January 1892; reproduced in Satyendranath Roy, *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Dharmachinta*, Rabindrarachana Sankalan, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Granthalay Pvt. Ltd, 2007), part I, p. 17. Roy wrongly attributes the story to the Bengali essayist Chandranath Basu.

interests, we try to accumulate wealth and happiness for ourselves. However, happiness cannot be truly realized unless we are prepared to share it with others. This is why the miserly people of this world are deprived of a larger happiness brought on by love. Our personal happiness turns frail and petty when we do not join it to Universal Happiness. Likewise, the desire to seek liberation only for oneself leads a man to aspire the summit of spiritual freedom where, eventually, he may find himself seated alone, to the exclusion of the rest of humanity. By comparison, freedom and liberation obtained through love is very different in character. Love never forsakes the world which God Himself has not forsaken. True liberation comes only when one makes this Universe one's own and oneself a part of the Universe....

4.

CHANDRANATH BABU ON THE VIRTUES OF VEGETARIANISM*

In the Aghrayan (November–December) issue of the journal *Sahitya*, Chandranath Babu has written as essay bearing the title

* *Source*: 'Ahaar Sambandhe Chandranath Babur Mot' (Chandranath Babu's Views on Food and Eating). First appeared in *Sadhana*,

'Ahaar' (Food). In his opinion, eating food has two objectives: to provide nutrition to the body and sustenance to the soul. He further states that while it is a well-known fact that food provides nutrition to the body, that it could also strengthen the soul is a secret that only India has known. Chandranath Babu alleges that it is their English education that has led the English-educated to lose sight of this profound truth and this, in turn, has led to their ultimately losing all capacity for developing religious feeling and for hard work, the natural goodness of heart, purity of character, and spiritual power. It is also his opinion that suitable instructions on matters of food and diet are best given by our traditional priests and pundits. Should this not be possible for some reason, instruction must come from religious scholars. Having argued thus, our author then goes on to make the claim that non-vegetarian food cannot provide the nutrition to either the body or the soul in the way vegetarian food can....

I place below my own views on this essay. Surely our author knows that the newly educated not only consume non-vegetarian food but are also disinclined to respect the counsel of their peers. Now there are certain matters that are open to debate and discussion and food is certainly one of them. However, for the entire length of the essay, the author has employed but only one argument and that too at the very end. This comes simply in the form of his signature: Chandranath Basu!

In the days gone by when rulers called for the head of some enemy, they would similarly write a very small note authorizing execution. Our own priests and gurus too are given to such cryptic commands in the name of religion. By comparison, our

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Pous 1298 BS/December–January 1892. Later included in the collection *Samaj-Parishista*; reproduced in RR, vol. 6, pp. 685–9. Chandranath Basu's essay 'Ahaar' appeared serially in the journal *Sahitya* between Sravan 1297 BS/July–August 1890 and Chaitra 1298 BS/March–April 1892.

English masters appear to behave very differently. When ordering someone's execution, they produce detailed statements in explanation. Similarly, before they assert their own views, our English teachers ensure that they are able to furnish supporting evidence lest they lose their jobs. It so happens that we are now the subjects of an English government and the students of English teachers. Hence, even though we respect Chandranath Babu's signature for what it is worth, we also expected some supporting arguments....

I have no knowledge of the discourse on food and diets prevalent in early India and Chandranath Babu too has refrained from disclosing this to his English-educated readers. All the same, Babu Rajendra Lal Mitra[1] has quite clearly established that meat was on the diet of early Indians.

It is true that at a certain point in time, Brahmins had given up animal food but the Brahmins alone do not constitute Indian society. If in India we somehow had a population of teachers, priests,

and sages running into about 20 crores, that population would have been decimated very soon. In early India, there was the meditative Brahmin but also the industrious Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. We had both brain and brawn and, hence, it was only natural to have both vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets. There was self-restraint imposed by our customs but also the freedom to step outside these. At a time when we had the virility of the Kshatriya, the pristine qualities of the Brahman shone through just as the act of forgiveness becomes more meaningful for the powerful. India was ruined the day our entire society attempted to turn pious and the virile races lost their virility by emulating

[1] Babu Rajendra Lal Mitra (1822–1891) was a renowned Indologist from Bengal. He authored over a hundred works in English, Bengali, and Sanskrit, ran a journal called *Vividartha Sangraha*, was the first Indian president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, was the president of the British Indian Association, and was awarded the titles of Raja and CIE.

the unenergetic Brahmin. Over time, this docile quality among our people rendered them completely incapable of productive work. Then, the patience of the cowardly began to be projected as the patience of the saintly, and lethargy and aversion to work assumed the name of renunciation....

I am not aware of any other country discovering the relationship between diets and the health of human souls but in medieval Europe too the clergy subjected themselves to several taboos concerning food and the conduct of daily life. But did starving and emaciated clergymen account for all of Europe? Did contemporary Europe not also have its warrior communities? Does not this harmonious balance of contrary forces or qualities form the very basis of social life? ...

It is still not definitively known if nutrition derived from food affects the soul or which kinds of food are particularly conducive for the growth of spirituality. Science has still not been able to determine this and if such secrets be at all known to some religious scholar, it would be more beneficial if, rather than depend on gurus or priests, Chandranath Babu were to reveal this to us himself.

It is on the whole true that eating in small quantities or fasting occasionally is an effective way of keeping our natural instincts and desires in check. There can be no easier method of self-control than this. However, curbing our natural desires does not necessarily enhance our spiritual qualities.... If we considered our passions and desires to be our enemy, then the only way to overcome fear of the enemy would be to end our own life....

Why is it that in the Gita, Krishna considers karma (activism) to be the best path for men? This is because it is work itself that increases our sense of authority and power. It is in work that man gives free rein to his desires but also manages to hold these in check. The more varied our work, the larger the challenge thrown at us, the greater is our self-application and self-restraint. Human will is to work as steam is to the steam engine. When working with the engine our aim is to maximize heat and energy by constantly

adding coal to the fire in the boiler and that, in turn, produces the steam that runs the locomotive. A man's life runs much the same way. It is entirely another matter if by liberation you mean putting out all the heat and fire and remaining buried in some place as a reptile hibernates in cold weather. This certainly was not Krishna's advice. To accomplish our work through our will and then to control the will through work is the best possible course for man.

Some of us may indeed suggest that the regulation of diet helps to take our mind away from material desires towards the spiritual. In reply, I would say that for a man whose profession is rowing a boat, occasionally handling the oars to keep the body fit will not be of any use. There is, in any case, such great need for self-control in our daily lives that to treat this only as a hobby does not make sense. There are many men who exercise great self-control in matters of fasting and in carrying out other religious ceremonies and vows but show no self-control in the routine activities of their lives. This is the hidden danger in fancy self-control. This may produce restraint with words but licentiousness in everyday work. A man could chant some holy mantra while secretly harbouring an evil plot in his heart; he may be charitable towards Brahmins but deceive others in business; he may regularly bathe in the Ganga and yet retain a tainted character.

If activism is taken to be the best course available to man and if meeting our routine domestic responsibilities alone does not constitute work, if a man considers social work to be valuable work, then the body cannot be looked down upon as something inferior or unholy. Under the circumstances, physical strength and bodily work will constitute an integral part of spirituality....

Though there has been conflicting opinion on the respective merits of vegetarian and animal food, Chandranath Babu has been quite forthwith in making his choice. He believes that non-vegetarian food is incapable of producing the kind of nutrition that vegetarian food can. It has been for over a hundred years that we have closely felt the mental and physical vigour of a ruling race that is by habit non-vegetarian. We fail to understand how Chandranath

Babu has overlooked this completely.... The bodily strength of this ruling race is quite visible in the closed fist that perilously stays close to our noses and in case we deny the mental vigour of this race, this would only expose our own intellectual failings.

In order to substantiate his arguments, the author has compared the ways of the strictly vegetarian habits of the traditional Hindu scholar with the flesh-eating modern Bengali. However, such a comparison is invalid for several reasons. First, such a comparison cannot be based on certain generalizations or assumptions made about each of the two categories. Second, even if we were to assume that our traditional pundits were stronger than the flesh-eating modern Bengali and that they lived longer, it cannot be said with any certainty that this was on account of their food habits. It is commonplace that the life of the traditional pundit is quite free of anxieties whereas for the modern young man, life poses several problems and anxieties. There is nothing that puts human life at a greater risk than prolonged anxiety....

The major allegation that Chandranath Babu makes against the modern English-educated is that they show no self-restraint and are easily drawn into a life of excessive indulgence. I am afraid I cannot accept Chandranath Babu's word if he was to suggest that traditional pundits had no such weaknesses. Regrettably, our author fails to see the distinction between those who behave like greedy animals and those who feed on animals. It is well known that the way to win over a Brahmin's loyalty is to offer him sumptuous food and gifts. The traditional Brahmin pundit, in fact, is a model of gluttony. Such a pundit would have no scruples in accepting the hospitality of even an outcaste and subsequently deny this misdemeanour in public. His grandson who relishes fowl cutlets at least has the honesty not to conceal this from public knowledge.

In any case the claim that Bengalis of an earlier generation were able to fully conquer their passions and that only animal food has made people lose self-control has no basis in fact. The writer ought to know that none of us have really met such a Bengali from an earlier generation. Those that we have met are

well past their youth and already preaching the virtues of self-control! This creates the false impression that men of an earlier generation were only given to chanting god's name....

It is not my intention to compare a vegetarian diet with the non-vegetarian. All that I wish to state is that it does not behove us to adopt a prophetic tone in what we write. There has now emerged a trend within contemporary Bengali literature to pontificate on matters in the manner of a guru. Even when truth is told in this fashion, it amounts to slighting truth because the veracity of any truth does not rest on the credentials of any person but the reasonableness of the arguments he makes.... To keep showering views that we consider infallible can cause amusement to others, sometimes even nuisance.

5.

FOREIGN EXPOSITION OF THE VEDANTA*

... There are occasions when, in attempting to free ourselves of one mystery, we unwittingly surrender ourselves to another.

* *Source*: 'Vedanter Videshiya Vyakhya' (Vedanta as Expounded by a Foreigner). First appeared in *Sadhana*, Bhadra 1301 BS/August–

By citing the tenets of Vedanta, Mr Deussen[1] has claimed that in ascribing the act of creation to an inert, immutable Brahman and in positing a hiatus between the human soul and the Divine, we only create obstacles on the road to human liberation. Prima facie, this claim cannot be denied. On the other hand, when Vedanta says that the world is not substantively real and that the hiatus between Brahman and the human soul is but an illusion, there are a few questions that immediately come to mind, the answers to which are not easily obtained.

Question: Whose is the illusion?
Answer: Of the *jiva* (human being)

But this cannot be a satisfactory answer to the question since jiva cannot be created out of a state of its own illusion.

The philosopher Sankara says that it is because the human soul is shrouded by the three attributes (*upadhis*) of the gross (*sthula*), subtle (*sukshma*), and causal (*karana*) bodies, that it sees itself as independent of Brahman. But from where did the body assume its form? Sankara raises this question and then answers it as follows:

The body is determined by our actions (karma).
But how is karma itself caused?
By the effect of various human emotions (*raga*).
How are these emotions caused?
By one's ego (*abhimana*).
How is the ego born?
From the lack of discernment (*aviveka*).
How is this caused?

September 1894; reproduced in Roy, *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Dharmachinta*, pp. 20–5.

[1] Paul Deussen (1845–1919), a well-known German Indologist, a student of Arthur Schopenhauer, and an acknowledged scholar of Vedanta, taught Sanskrit and Vedanta in several European universities. He visited India in 1892–3. His major work, *Das system de Vedanta* (The System of the Vedanta), originally written in German, was published in 1883.

From Ignorance (*agyana*).
What causes Ignorance?
This has no cause. Ignorance is eternal and indefinable.

From this we can deduce that it is Ignorance (agyana, *avidya*) that creates the division between jiva and Brahman. However, that which we call Ignorance cannot have an autonomous existence; it has to be seen as depending on someone. Now if this Ignorance belongs to Brahman, then Brahman cannot be called immutable (*niranjan, nirvikar*). If, on the other hand, one has to separately acknowledge its eternal existence, this amounts to acknowledging Brahman and Ignorance as two distinct entities. But this is merely juggling with words since we have, in effect, acknowledged both Brahman and non-Brahman, albeit under different names. We claim that both Brahman and Ignorance are eternally present and ineffable, and yet it is Brahman alone that is untouched by Ignorance. If we accept this line of argument, then it becomes possible to accept under different names or forms, jiva and Brahman, the world (*jagat*) and god (*iswara*).

In the philosophy of Vedanta, all analogies used to explain the world as an Illusion are dualistic in nature. A typical example here would be the illusion of a pearl within an oyster. For such an illusion to occur, at least three things are required: the oyster, the pearl, and the person who suffered the illusion. A mirage too occurs in similar ways. We simply fail to imagine how, without there being an object of illusion, without the object appearing as something else and the person being so misled, there can occur any illusion at all.

In concluding his essay, the analogy that Mr Deussen uses to explicate his point is itself self-contradictory. Let us reproduce the relevant passage in the original: 'It is not the falling of the drop into the infinite ocean, it is the whole ocean, becoming free from the fetters of ice, returning from its frozen state to that what it is really and has never ceased to be, to its own all-pervading, eternal, almighty nature.'

The underlying meaning of these lines is that we must not separate the river that feeds into the ocean from the ocean itself for that would amount to duality. We could not even say that upon melting, a frozen ocean assumes its natural shape since that would imply aberration in something that is taken to be changeless. Rather, we should say that the ocean remains what it is and what it always has been. However, even this fails to provide meaning since some time back we had wondered about just what happened when the liberated in life (*jivanmukta*) met with death. Did he, like the river, ultimately meet the ocean or assume the natural state of the ocean after all the solid ice had melted on account of the summer heat? From this it emerges that when we spoke of death coming to jiva, it was not jiva that we meant. That which died was not jiva. How then do we talk of the jiva dying? This is born of an illusion. Whose was this illusion? If this be born of the Brahman, then we might as well grant that the Brahman too underwent some mutation. In truth, however, even though an illusion, this cannot be attributed to anybody. This illusion is self-born, it is eternal and ineffable.

It must be admitted then that even if we were to assume a dualistic position, our thoughts are bound to go round and round this great riddle. All the same, when the non-dualist starts accusing the dualist of irrationalism in order to augment his own position, then he too must be made answerable. Perhaps in the very depths of spiritual life there is a strange synthesis of dualism and non-dualism that remains shrouded in what is an impenetrable mystery for our little minds. On that level, perhaps, we may defy all mathematical rules and logic and begin to call that which is One, Two, and vice versa.

We have some queries too on what Mr Deussen has to say on the subject of religious morality in Vedanta.

Mr Deussen states that there lies a moral necessity behind the repeated cycles of life and death or creation and dissolution. Thus re-birth becomes necessary so that our good acts are suitably

rewarded and wrongdoings appropriately punished. Our lives, after all, must be governed by the fruits of our actions.

In non-dualism, however, such inexorable rules can have no meaning. Where there is nothing apart from One, there can be no room for moral relationships.

The work *Atmanataviveka* of Sankara has already been cited to show how karma originates in Ignorance and how Ignorance is eternally present. We assume our physical bodies because something as indescribable as karma originates in something equally indescribable as Ignorance, and it is on this account that we also undergo repeated births and experience pain. Now in our opinion, this may be called anything but a rule of religious morality. In the first place, we do not quite know what Ignorance is and there is no way of knowing either since this is beyond description (we wonder why it is called Ignorance at all since Ignorance too presumes some determinate quality). Second, it is not clear just what is meant by the suggestion that karma originates in Ignorance for, in common understanding, that which we call karma has no autonomous existence. Eventually, we are given to understand that the physical body of the jiva takes shape on account of certain other properties which have no known origin or support. To put this in the way I have is only as good as saying that we do not quite know how the physical body was first born or even that some explanation offered in this regard would remain unintelligible to us.

In the light of the above argument it may be said that Vedanta offers us no cogent explanation about how our physical bodies came to exist or why they must continue to suffer unhappiness or pain. Since we attribute our suffering to something as indescribable as karma, we might as well admit that we do not actually know the cause behind this suffering.

This matter has been taken up in the *Brahma Sutra* of Vedvyasa.[2] Vedvyasa says that we are not in a position to say that before

[2] The *Brahma Sutra* is commonly attributed to Badrayana. It is a collection of aphorisms from the Upanishads dealing with the Absolute/

creation there was no division of labour since karma and creation are eternally bound with one another as cause and effect. Take the case of the seed and the tree. The seed is the cause behind the tree as is the tree of the seed and in this way, it is impossible to determine a point of origin.

From this it may be deduced that there is a perennial relationship between karma and creation. In this case what we understand by karma is perhaps comparable to the English word 'force' which is to say that it represents something that we do not understand even though there may be some cognizable suggestions offered to us.

No matter how we perceive things and irrespective of what Vedanta has to say, it seems meaningless at the end of it all to ask why we exist. We exist and this existence of ours is eternal. And it is this very existence that is the cause behind all our pain and misery. Hence, it is equally pointless to ask why we continue to suffer. In that event, there can be no room for moral or any other form of necessity.

As regards the theory of liberation, we may say that when Ignorance has no beginning in time (*anadi*), it is also endless (*ananta*). So long as It exists, there can be no liberation for anybody. In the Vedantic view, I am a part of all and all is within me and, hence, so long as there is Ignorance somewhere, It will continue to affect me. To keep oneself apart from Ignorance sounds like someone trying to run away from his own shadow.

In answering the question why Brahman created this world, the *Brahma Sutra* says *lokavattva lilakaivalyam.* Just as in this world children playfully assume various roles like that of a king,

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Brahman. It is a key text for all followers of the philosophical school of Vedanta. It is one of the three texts that constitute the *Prasthan Traya* (triple canon) for Vedantists; the others being the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Interestingly, the Gita is a *smriti* and hence belongs to a lower order of authority. The *Brahma Sutra* has been interpreted differently by various sub-schools within Vedanta.

etc., the world too is Brahman's field of Play (leela).[3] In this view, He alone whose Will brought about this world can grant deliverance to it. In other words, should He so will or else withhold His will, He can stop appearing as this world and reveal his True Self (*shuddha swarupa*). Hence, without the dissolution of this world, the question of individual liberation would be meaningless. This is because to manifest Himself as a person or not is entirely a matter of His will. Even if he chooses not to manifest Himself as a particular Person, so long as there is this world, he would continue to enact His Divine Play.

Elsewhere, when dealing with the chapter titled 'Discourse on Nature', Mr Deussen has demonstrated that first, according to Kant,[4] anything concerning time and space or the relationship between cause and effect lies within the confines of our minds, not outside. Hence, when we see an object as an object, it is the mind that is at work. If this subjective understanding were to be somehow detached from the object, we will be able to view its Real Nature (*yatartha swarupa*). This Being that transcends time and space is what Schopenhauer[5] calls Will, and Vedanta, atma. This One without a Second (*ekamebadwitiyam*), this Will or atma is completely without any qualities: there is neither sin, nor unhappiness, nor even existence.

In this Pure Bliss, untouched by unhappiness and desire, there appeared signs of infatuation and sinfulness (this occurred not at

[3] A concept particularly significant in the theistic traditions such as in Vaishnavism. 'Leela' in Vaishnavism is inscrutable Divine Play.

[4] Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a renowned German philosopher of the European Enlightenment. He used a combination of reason and experience to go beyond the shortcomings of traditional philosophy. His best-known work is *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

[5] Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was a well-known German philosopher considerably influenced by early Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, who in turn influenced several generations of German Indologists and philosophers. The original German version of his *The World as Will and Representation* was published in 1818–19 (second edition in 1844).

some particular time: it could be true of today as for all time and even before time). This atma then assumed certain qualities.

Let us reproduce the original passage:

> Now there was formed,—not at any time, but before all eternity and forever, like an inexplicable clouding of the clearness and heavens, in the pure, painless, and will-less bliss of denial a morbid propensity, a sinful bent: the affirmation of the will to life. In it and with it is given the myriad host of all the sins and woes of which this measurable world is the revealer.

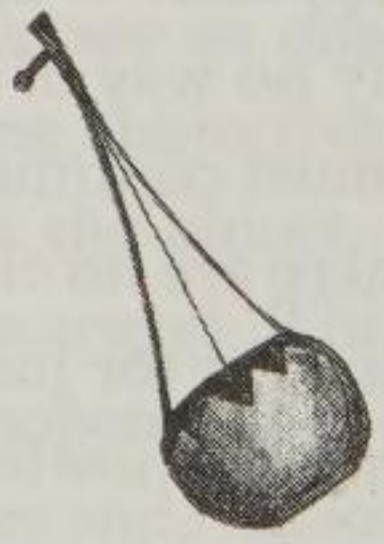
The human mind has always been asking: why did creation take place? Why did unhappiness come into existence? Both Sankara and Mr Deussen would have us believe that once something that is endless and indescribable casts its shadow on something that is identical in nature, unhappiness is born. Simply put, this only suggests that there is really no way of knowing what creation is, what caused it or why we must continue to undergo unhappiness and sin. And in Vedanta, there are no clear answers as to how one may free oneself of Ignorance or for just who is it that is freed.

Buddhist nihilists[6] do not acknowledge any of this. They do not even acknowledge that world is manifesting itself. In their view, there is neither Brahman, nor this world; there is neither me, nor you.... That which is eternal and may never be destroyed may be called Maya or even the Truth. But once you accept its existence you cannot also accept the possibility of liberation. However, for the nihilists who do not accept anything, matters are quite easy. You may ask them: 'If there is only emptiness and void, how is it that you are able to prove anything?' This they will answer by proving that they are not out to prove anything! If I were to say: 'If there is only void, why do you at all raise the matter of liberation?' To this they will say: 'Since I do not exist,

[6] Nihilism is a philosophical doctrine which suggests that life has no objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. This has been known to lead to an attitude of despair which sees the very existence of the world as pointless. Buddhist nihilists were known as Sunyavadis.

it is inconceivable that I should be saying something!'" Hence, for one who denies everything it becomes much easier to have his way. The moment you claim that there is but One, it becomes impossible to prove that there may not exist another. Similarly, when a dualist in philosophy, it is beyond anyone to demonstrate that the two can become One.

You may ask me what I personally think of this matter. Frankly, I do not have a clue as to what all this is. All I know is that the love, devotion, compassion, affection, and aesthetic sense that there is in me seeks endless fulfilment. It is in these sundry qualities that I savour the Eternal, in Him I find my fulfilment. No matter who He is or where He is to be found, He is my Brahman, in Him lies my liberation.



6.

CAN GOD BE WORSHIPPED AS AN IMAGE?*

In our country, there is often a debate on whether God is or is not endowed with form. However, in the work under review, this

* *Source*: 'Sakar o Nirakar Upasana' (The Worship of the God with Form and of the Formless God). Rabindranath Tagore's review of

question has not been dealt with in so crude a manner. Rather, it tries to discuss whether or not God may be worshipped as an image.

Some people will promptly answer this question by arguing that those who cannot conceive a formless God will be bound to fall back on the use of an image. Our author, however, does not take this middle-of-the-road course. His argument, quite categorically put, is that there can be no worship of a formless God. This leaves man with only two choices: either to consider himself identical with God (*sohaham*) or else take to the worship of images. The intention of our author, apparently, is to begin striking from the opposite end: rather than demolish images in the manner of fabled iconoclasts, he wishes to destroy those who are opposed to image worship. But his mission is not simply to protect image worship, it is also to argumentatively demolish the very possibility of worshipping a formless God.

It is always easier to establish on the basis of fact, rather than argument, what is possible and what is not. It is hard to convince a king of a tropical country that extreme cold can turn water into ice. However, he only has to take a tour of the Himalayan region to be convinced of this. However, our author does not appear to believe in this method; he believes that his case may be established on the basis of argument alone.

Muslims do not worship images and yet it cannot be claimed that among them there is not a single devotee of God. Our author may not understand what makes this possible but it is nonetheless true that devotion among Muslims does not come through the worship of images.

Sakar o Nirakar Tattwa by Jatindramohan Singha. First published in *Bharati*, Ashwin 1305 BS/September–October 1898. Later included in the collection *Adhunik Sahitya* (1907); reproduced in RR, vol. 5, pp. 601–6.

None will dare say that Nanak[1] was not one of the greatest of devotees to be born on this earth and it is equally true that he never proclaimed that man was God. Thus, the fact that he gave up conventional image worship and propagated the idea of a formless God could have had only one reason. Surely he must have found delight in the worship of a formless God and found conventional image worship to pose problems on the way. There would be someone even within the Brahmo community whose heartfelt devotion led him to discard the worship of images. Now, in the opinion of our author, this Brahmo gentleman may have been misled but surely there can be no doubt about the sincerity of his devotion. This he had demonstrated not merely through argument but by the willingness to suffer every act of social persecution and hardship.

There was a time when India did not know image worship. However, it is difficult to produce historical evidence in support of this claim for a period so far removed in time. The examples

that I have cited from the modern period will at least go to prove that some devotees have been disillusioned enough to voluntarily give up image worship and that there are several devotees, scattered all over the world, who have derived immense satisfaction from the worship of a formless God.

In the book the author argues that while such men may not worship images, it is inconceivable that thereby they are also worshipping a formless God. In his opinion, that which has a name and attributes is bound to have some form and since the knowledge of God is based on these categories, this too must possess some form. But this is arguing for the sake of argument. If I said that A travelled along a curved line and B did not, you might counter by saying that actually B too travelled along a curved line since

[1] Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539) founded the Sikh religion. His teachings are available in the Guru Granth Sahib and some other texts. The *Japji* comprises the core of the Granth Sahib. Nanak preached a religion which did not permit image worship or ornate ritualism.

all straight lines are imaginary. What you say is true but mere argument. Our language cannot exceed our minds and our minds too are constrained by certain limits. This makes language itself relative. That which appears sharp to the naked eye turns out to be blunt under the microscope; that which appears smooth and even to the naked eye turns out to be jagged and uneven when magnified a hundred times. Hence, I dare not suggest that even within the worship of a formless, there can not appear any traces of form!

If that be so, you may ask what harm can there be in the worship of God through images? After all, if the formless God cannot be grasped by the mind, we might as well worship Him through an easier way. In truth, however, while forms can serve as useful aides for the mind, this does not necessarily take us to the conclusion that the formless is made easier and cognizable through some form.

Suppose I wished to describe the ocean but the ocean was at some distance away. Now just as I was about to commence my journey to see it for myself, there appears the scholar who warns me that the ocean was so large that I could not have an accurate opinion about it even after I had actually viewed it. His argument was that the only way to conceptualize something as large was to mentally reduce it. Hence, it would be just as good to dig a pond in the neighbourhood and take that for the ocean. But this is intriguing. If upon viewing the ocean we could not conceive the ocean for what it truly was, how was this possible through looking at a pond?

The boundless sky is beyond our imagination but I cannot, for that reason, prefer not view it at all. Unless I am able to see what I can possibly see of the sky, I am not satisfied. It is this attempt to know the Boundless and the Infinite that constitutes worship. When, even at the end of our journey He still eludes us, we break into a song in praise of the Lord: 'O Omnipresent Lord! Verily have I failed to fathom your Presence!' But even that failure produces some happiness: *bhumaiva sukham, nalpe sukhamasti.*

The astronomy known to Ptolemy is easily intelligible to us. Man can easily conceive the idea of planetary bodies revolving around the earth. But today, astronomy has gone beyond such narrow and false conceptions to the infinite mysteries of the universe. The realization that this world is but a tiny speck of dust in the vast universe has surely excited and expanded our imagination....

It is then that our closed mind opens up to the possibilities of liberation. He whom our words or mind fail to define is not some void for us. He is Divine Joy. We adore Him who is larger than us. He who elicits our pious adoration is boundless and without any limits....

In truth, not all of us desire God, not everybody is attracted towards the spiritual. Those who lead a religious life solely with an eye on acquiring wealth and happiness, reducing the burden of one's sins or acquiring religious merit, have turned away from that which is spiritual. George Elliot has called this the phenomenon

of 'otherworldliness'. Those who are caught up in this have little interest in the debate over whether or not God can be endowed with form. They merely go by convenience and by commonplace advice. Such opportunists may be found on both sides of the fence.

But there are also those to whom spirituality comes naturally and who are never distracted by the lures of worldly life. Like the eye of the compass, their mind points to only one direction: to God.... When such a devotee is born within a culture that practices image worship, he uses his extraordinary powers to transform the visual image into that which is purely mental. His mind goes beyond what his eyes see; it is the joy that the object brings that becomes more important. Physical images that still persist are left behind purely as a matter of habit; these do not have to be categorically cast aside. For such a man, the whole world is an allegory, not to speak of the image. When he sees the word 'tree' printed on paper, it is not the word that his eyes focus on; in an instant he conjures up the vision of a gigantic

tree with numerous branches. However, such visions come to only extraordinarily gifted men. Chaitanya[2] and Ramprasad Sen[3] were two such men. There are also those who actively sever their ties with established conventions of image worship as they find this to be deluding. They then proceed to worship God through their souls and in this world. Kabir and Nanak are good instances of this....

If we continue to construct images of God in keeping with our own temperament or our bodily form, it would be impossible to obtain liberation. What is it that we actually do when we bathe our gods, put him under the mosquito net, and even engage a female actor for his entertainment? In this, we only worship our own nature as God; we immortalize our own greed, our own violence and pettiness as God. It is because of this reason that robbers take the goddess Kali to be their guardian deity in acts of robbery.... All that is despicable, unjust, and unreasonable and not befitting human nature, we take beyond reproach by associating with God....

In this country, some morally revolting acts and ideals that have come to be ascribed to God are but the aberrations of a demented mind. It seems that our author admits this to be one of the reasons for the degeneration of Hindu society and is prepared to advise reform. But what exactly is it that he says?

[2] Sri Krishna Chaitanya (1486–1533), originally Vishambar Mishra, was a Brahmin social and religious reformer from district Nadia, West Bengal. He accepted *sanyas* but strongly declined to accept non-dual Vedantic philosophy. His penchant was for *ahetuki bhakti* (selfless devotion). He inspired many popular religious cults in Bengal through his radical social and religious message. However, post-Chaitanya, Vaishnavism became more doctrinal under the famed Goswamis of Vrindavan.

[3] A popular sakta poet, singer, and practitioner of *sakti-tanra*, Ramprasad Sen's (1720–1781) favoured deity was the goddess Kali. He created the genre of *shyamasangit* (songs in praise of Kali) and was patronized by Raja Krishna Chandra Roy of Nadia.

> Behind every scripture lies the Vedas, the *shruti*. It is through the shruti that all internally conflicting opinion in the scriptures can be resolved.

The method may have been laid down but has anyone ever tried to do this? Has any Hindu scholar succeeded in reconciling the religion of the Puranas to that of the Vedas and constructed a grand ideal that may have been followed by all? Is this task at all possible for everyone?

Historically, the religion of the Puranas is old. Over time, the Hindus have known many changes. The social conventions, faith, or temperament with which the Vedic Aryans entered India were progressively changed after coming into contact with the non-Aryans. Such new experiences have gone into the making of the Puranas. Vedic religious culture is markedly different from that of the Puranas. Hence, if the Vedas are to be considered the authority (pramana), then the Puranas will have to be given up, and, conversely, if the Puranas are taken to be authoritative, then the Vedas must be forsaken. The author of this volume has himself admitted that if the views of one Purana are accepted, this immediately comes into conflict with those of another. In present-day Hindu society, the Vedas are only nominally accepted and the Puranas, in practical, everyday life, and no one seems to raise the question of their mutual incompatibility.

This historical self-expression of Hinduism continues to the present day since the Puranas were composed not only in Sanskrit but also in the vernacular. Apt examples of this are the ballads of the goddess Manasa[4] and that of Satyapir.[5] The

[4] Hindu folk goddess of snakes, Manasa is said to protect against snake bites (hence also the name *vishahari*) and bring fertility and prosperity to her worshippers. Religious literature on her became a part of the genre called *Mangal Kavya* literature in medieval Bengal.

[5] Also known as Satyanarayan, this is a popular and syncretic rural cult that may have begun around the late seventeenth century. It is associated with both Hindus and Muslims.

various domestic rites and vows (*vrata*) carried out by Hindu women also fall into this category. Even though the work *Annadmangal*[6] has the puranic Siva and Durga as their main characters, and despite its author, Bharatchandra, a reputed scholar, a good amount of distasteful matter has entered this work. The same may be said of the work *Kavikankanchandi*.[7] The recurring domestic quarrels between Siva and Parvati, Siva's weakness for Koch women, Durga's crafting idols out of the dirt produced from her body, and Ganesh's birth thereof are some tales of this genre. Their source does not lie in the shruti but in popular imagination. The major idea behind all this is to craft God in man's image. To locate some allegory of a high order in such tales is impossible for the common man and extremely difficult even for the extraordinary.

My conclusion, in brief, is that even those holy men who did not formally give up the worship of images used their extraordinary powers to go beyond what ordinarily meets the eye. Like X-rays discovered by Rontgen, the powers of their minds could penetrate all obstacles and see things in their true light. However, there can be no doubt that the common man remained incapable of this....

In every society, the majority of men adhere to what is conventionally established in society. Among Brahmos many keep mechanically uttering some words or hearing them, and image-worshippers too presume that they have fulfilled their religious duty by carrying out external forms of worship or some private meditation. However, those Brahmos who may be counted as Brahmos, not just socially but also spiritually, are not guilty of

[6] A work in praise of the Goddess, written by the eighteenth-century poet Bharatchandra Roy in 1752 at the request of Raja Krishna Chandra Roy.

[7] A sixteenth-century work on the goddess Chandi by Mukundaram Chakrabarti.

following a wildly distracted religion such as the author of the present volume would have us think....

7.

UNWORTHY REVERENCE*

When the guru and the priest
in whom all life subsists
come calling at home,
should you greet them empty-handed
they are greatly offended,
and though there be a smile on their lips
inwardly they are mighty displeased.
If, however, you pay them three rupees in cash,
placing their holy feet on your head
they will happily grant you boons!

... The verses quoted above clearly suggest how we imagine the guru and the priest to be endowed with some special powers.

* *Source*: 'Ajogya Bhakti' (Unworthy Reverence), originally called 'Swadhin Bhakti', first published in *Bharati*, Aghrayan 1305 BS/November–December 1898; reproduced in RR, vol. 6, pp. 547–53.

Irrespective of their state of learning, character, or behaviour, it is commonly held that they are the reason behind every auspicious thing that happens to this world. It is also our belief that we stand to gain by showing them respect and devotion and to suffer upon failing to show these. Such beliefs have led us to keep our heads perpetually bowed down before them. In certain communities, such faith has gone so far as to encourage people to violate commonplace rules of domestic morality for the sake of showing reverence to the guru.

This is an argument that we may equally apply to the gods. Not everyone takes gods to bear the ideal character. On the contrary they adhere to the belief that good results are bound to follow from showing reverence to the gods since they are such powerful figures.

We may speak similarly of the Brahmin. A Brahmin, even if he be a miscreant and an abominable character, is still revered as a Brahmin. Here too, the popular belief is that the Brahmin possesses special powers and it is his pleasure or displeasure that explain our good luck or misfortune. In such acts of reverence, there is simply no spiritual bonding between the devotee and the object of devotion. Rather, it is a relationship that seeks to bring pecuniary benefit to one another....

With regard to the reverence shown to the gods, many modern-educated people put forth some intricate arguments. They claim that since God is omniscient and omnipresent, no matter what or whom we worship, such worship is acceptable to God. By thus arguing they wish to prove that such worship cannot fail to produce results.

From the above, it would appear as though the act of worshipping is comparable to paying land revenue! Irrespective of whether you pay the revenue to the king himself or his chosen employee, its ultimate destination is, in each case, the royal treasury. The idea of entering into a pecuniary relationship with God is so deeply entrenched in our minds that we are led to believe

that by worshipping God, we favour him and that somehow it is God's duty to return that favour. Since the vital issue here is to ensure that his homage falls into the right hands, the trader in religion is eager to bring this about with the minimum effort and incurring the least expenses. For him, there is simply no need to determine the nature or essence of God or to undertake a rigorous search for Truth. He then proceeds to presume that even if it were only a piece of wood or stone that he worshipped, God would eagerly extend his hand to accept such worship.

From descriptions available in the Puranas and other extant religious literature of the Hindus it would appear as though each god is as eager to grab a greater part of the offerings made as a pack of vultures would be with respect to a carcass. From this it would seem that among our educated there subconsciously exists the belief that it is God who is so eager to appropriate devotion to himself.

However, whether it be a matter of revering God or man, devotion is a virtue that the devotee makes. There is really no harm if he at whom this devotion is directed does not know of this himself. On the other hand, one's devotion becomes truly worthy if one gets to fully know the object of devotion. If it is my intention to integrate the ideal represented by God or a man with my personal nature, the only path available is that of devotion. If we truly desire him whom we worship then it becomes necessary to establish in our hearts the Truth and the ideal that he represents through the use of devotion....

This is the true glory underlying devotion. Devotional fervour is that chemical process that can dissolve the humble and fully blend it with that which is Grand. Hence, when we worship God, this does not necessarily enhance his power or splendour; it is we who chemically unite with God. The higher our conception or ideal of God, the deeper the joy in the union and greater the expansion of our souls....

When our devotion is directed at the unworthy, we sinfully place he who is truly worthy of worship alongside he who is not. This obliterates the distinction between gods and demi-gods. In our country such sinfulness has occurred at several fronts. We have clubbed together immoral conduct and sinfulness. It is considered a sin to touch a ritually defiled person; it is equally a sin to kill him. One may avoid social recrimination by killing a human being, not a cow! One may be pardoned for wrongfully depriving a non-Hindu (*yavana*) of food but not for accepting food offered by him....

By thus mixing up immoral practices, the imperfect performance of social customs, and violation of moral duty (dharma), we have created dense confusion and deep-seated atheism. In replicating such matters in the domain of devotional life, we have ruined its spiritual content. Hence, our willingness to bow down before the corrupt Brahmin but not the saintly Shudra....

Why has this perversity arisen? This is principally because those human qualities that attain their true worth and glory in human freedom have been kept in chains.

True devotion arises in our ability to surrender before those worthy of using a free intellect and heartfelt devotion. This can never be born of mere habit or blindly following directions given to us....

8.

THE SIMPLE WAYS OF RELIGION*

Lighting lamps at some corner of my house requires prior arrangements. For this simple act, I have to depend on several processes and the services of a number of people. At one place, someone will have sown mustard; elsewhere, people will be engaged in extracting oil out of mustard seeds; at a third site, the oil would have to be bought and sold. And even after all that, there still remains the matter of suitably manufacturing the lamps. Such varied and numerous acts finally produce but the pale glow of an oil lamp, and whereas light from lamps does provide me some illumination it also further intensifies the darkness outside....

If someone were to say that there was some closely guarded secret about just how one may receive the first rays of the morning sun, our immediate reaction would be to believe that the secret possibly referred to some artificial source of light, not the light at dawn. This is because natural light descends upon us of its own volition; it is only the light synthetically produced by us and for a special purpose that requires proper handling.

So is the case with religion. This too, like natural light, is free and natural. It represents the act of God's lovingly gifting Himself to us. Know this: that which is True and Eternal stands very still, surrounding us closely, permeating our very being and consciousness. To experience God all we need to do

* *Source*: 'Dharmer Saral Adarsha' (The Simple Ideals of Religion). First appeared in the journal *Bongodarshan*, Magh 1309 BS/January–February 1903 and included in the collection *Dharma* (1315 BS/1908); reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 460–7.

is to seek Him and to sufficiently awaken our hearts. Just as it is impossible for us to manufacture daylight, similarly, we would have never experienced religion, the springs of our eternal life, were this religion to be gained only through some human contrivance.

That which we proceed to specially design ourselves usually turns out to be something cluttered and complex. Our society is complex as is our everyday life and such complexities, when joined to the staggering variety that we experience in our everyday lives, truly mesmerizes us. It is thus that our untutored minds begin to falsely ascribe high scholarship to philosophical teachings that are quite convoluted. Civilizations or cultures whose structures and functions are varied and their methods of organization extensive and complex, can easily overwhelm our weak minds. However, he alone who can present a philosophical discourse lucidly is the truly powerful and gifted philosopher; that civilization is superior which employs simple rules to render its social organization well-ordered and intelligible. However else it may appear from the outside, complexity actually begets signs of weakness and non-fulfilment. Simplicity, on the other hand, is the hallmark of fulfilment. Religion represents the only and the highest ideal of that which attains fulfilment on account of its naturalness and sheer simplicity.

Regrettably, it is religion itself that now stands affected by great social complexities. Having been subjected to endless ritualism, meaningless acts, abstract conceptions, and quaint imagination, it has become so obscure and unnatural that each day one man or another is able to create new and mutually conflicting sects out of this self-begotten fantasy. There now appears to be no end to the hostility, mutual bickering, and suspicion that such mutually conflicting claims have created.

Why has this come about? The only reason for this is that rather than mould our lives in the light of religion, we are often driven to do the very opposite. We begin to believe that like

several other things in this world which we try to render useful to ourselves, religion too can be made to serve our personal needs.

Religion is indeed our most pressing requirement but it is precisely for this reason that any attempt to modify it in keeping with our recurring worldly needs ruins it altogether. Since religion is capable of transcending the categories of time and space and is immutable, it remains invaluable to human needs. It is because religion is larger than us that it offers itself a safe refuge in an ever-changing world. It may be reasonably argued that each of us may comprehend religion in keeping with our own nature or character. But here lies the problem. Since human nature is diverse, that which is essentially one and indivisible begins to acquire multiple qualities. And where there is multiplicity, there is bound to be complexity and where there is complexity, conflicts will naturally arise.

Fortunately, we can do away with all attempts to 'understand' religion. God Himself, as the source of religion, is beyond human conception or comprehension. In truth, what we do manage to conceive is not religion but this material world which carries within it all the vagaries of worldly life. This world, as we know it, is characterized by immense diversity or difference and, hence, it becomes all the more necessary never to lose sight of Truth. At the same time, we must ensure that this Truth is not in some way fragmented or compromised by our everyday experiences.

Let me illustrate my point with the help of an apt example. A house is one of our primary requirements and it is here that we happily reside. By comparison, the open sky may not be as humanly habitable. And yet, it is essential that we allow the open sky to remain the way it is. It is when we cease to acknowledge the difference between the unbounded sky and bounded homes that we turn the latter into a prison and a site comparable to the graveyard. We may be led to believe that by erecting walls in the vast expanse of the sky, we manage to extend our homes. In so doing, however, we only push the open sky further away

from us. If we were to take the sky as the roof to our house, we lose sight of that which is the source of all light and the eternal playground of all that there is in this cosmos. Thereby, we also convert that which is natural and naturally available to us into something extremely hard to obtain. Everything else in this world we may be able to call our own by constructing synthetic boundaries; religion, on the contrary, is something that we may obtain only upon breaking down these boundaries. We may be possessive about something that belongs to this world, not about something that transcends it altogether....

This simple ideal of religion was once available in India. We may glean such matters through a study of the Upanishads. That which the Upanishads describe is Brahman and which is in itself complete, indivisible, and unaffected by human imagination. The Upanishads declare:

Satya Gyanamananta Brahman.[1]

Brahman alone is the Truth or else nothing else in this Universe would be true. He alone is Knowledge and that which is available to us is His Knowledge. Only that which He knows exists; that alone is the Truth. He is Eternal; He is Eternal Truth; He is Eternal Knowledge.

The Upanishads take this world as fully absorbed in the Eternal Truth and Eternal Knowledge of Brahman. The Upanishads have not spoken of some special habitat for Brahman, nor have they indicated some special place of worship or erected a special image of Him. By truly comprehending the nature of Brahman, the Upanishads have thrown out all fanciful imagination. Where else but in India will you find a purer and more ennobling conception of religion?

By thoughtlessly suggesting that the Brahman of the Upanishads is not humanly cognizable, we banish from our lives

[1] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, II.1:2.

the wisdom inherited from our sages. Just because the limitless sky is not in our control, we cannot call it non-existent or inaccessible. On the contrary, it is the limitless quality of the sky that especially makes it open and accessible. In truth, that which we may conceive using the powers of our mind or that to which we may relate through our sense organs will always pose problems for us. The tiny walls that we construct on this earth may be difficult to scale but the unbounded sky will never pose similar problems. We can devise ways and means through which to overcome the obstacle presented by the wall; by comparison, all thoughts of crossing over the sky are meaningless. It is a fistful of gold that we may find very difficult to procure; the rays of light that illuminate the morning sky do not have a price attached to them. These are not even steeply priced; they are simply priceless.

This is an appropriate analogy through which we may begin to understand the Brahman of the Upanishads. He is the most intimate object as also the farthest removed from us. Our very being

is founded upon His Truth; it is in his perpetual Joy (ananda) that we are ever manifest....

It is from this ananda that all life forms are born; it is also this that energizes them and turns them active. It is in this ananda that they rejoice. Of everything that has been said of God it is this that represents the essence of it all and the Truth that is readily understood. To make Brahman a part of our lives we need not resort to imagination, construct something synthetic or fanciful, travel great distances or await a special day and hour. It is when the heart becomes anxious to experience Him that through our very breath begins to flow the Bliss of Brahman and our souls are deeply stirred by His presence. It is then that our mind itself begins to radiate this ananda and revel in this enjoyment. Just as the break of dawn awaits the beholder's eye, similarly the Bliss of Brahman awaits only the awakening of the human heart.

When seeking to experience Brahman, our efforts should be similar to exposing ourselves to natural light, not trading in

gold. If not, our efforts will yield only difficulties and ill will. Irrespective of whether we know this or not, the path to truly experiencing Brahman lies through the arousing of the mind and soul within the framework of ties that eternally link us to Brahman.

In India, the mystic syllable (mantra) believed to bring this about is extremely simple. It is the Gayatri Mantra which is short enough to be uttered in a single intake of breath. We open with:

Om bhurbhuvaha swaha

This particular portion of the Gayatri is called *vyahati* which means that which is gathered from all around us. Then follows a certain process: we must begin by conceptualising the entire cosmos within us. Thereafter we must believe that we are citizens of the entire universe, not of some particular country. Next, we utter the following:

tatsaviturvaranyam bhargo devasya dhimahi

We meditate upon God who created this world. We meditate upon the Powers of God as manifest in this world.... But just how are we to relate to this Power that created this world?

dhiyo yo nah pracodayat

We meditate upon Him using the very mental faculties that He has given us. How do we see sunlight? This is made possible by the rays of light that the sun itself keeps showering on us....

Once I realize that the world outside me and my own powers of cognition are but manifestations of the same Power, matters at once become simple. By connecting my mind to the world and upon realizing the intimate relationship between myself and God who combines in Himself Truth, Consciousness, and Bliss (*saccidananda*), I liberate myself from all bigotry, all self-seeking, and unhappiness. The Gayatri Mantra links the world outside me to my inner self and the inner self to God who resides in it.

This old Vedic method of invoking Brahman is as natural as it is simple. It is devoid of all that is unnatural. None of us is really required to keep searching for either the external world or our inner self; in truth, these are the only things that we truly possess all the time. Once we realize how His tireless energy is constantly keeping alive and energizing ourselves and this world, it becomes possible for us to relate to Him fully and intimately. I doubt if the same can be achieved by employing some synthetic method or fancy imagination....

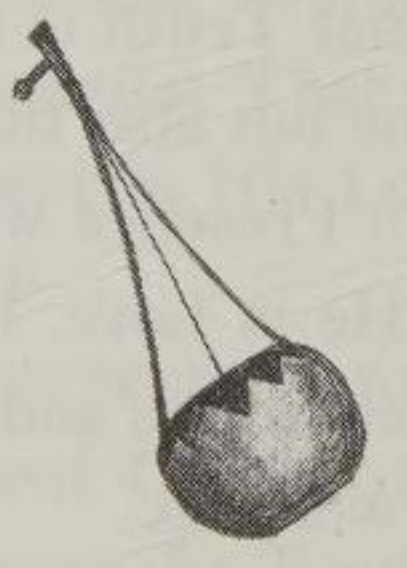
Foreigners and their favourite Indian followers claim that Hinduism only reveals its incompleteness and inferiority by not paying sufficient attention to the problem of sin. I would rather claim that this, in fact, proves its very superiority. Here, in India, we had gone into the bottom of concepts like sinfulness and religious virtue (pap, punya). But rather than be caught up in endless debates around these questions, we concentrated on yoking ourselves to He who is Eternal Bliss. We were of the view that on experiencing

God, all our sins were washed away and spiritual fullness acquired. If a mother were to be constantly reminded about what she must or must not do for her son, such advice may go on interminably. But if, instead, she were asked to simply love her son, all else is taken care of. Nothing more need be said. If religion were to be understood from the sole perspective of how not to sin, it will become horrifying and truly burdensome. If, however, we remain aware of God's goodwill and love that permeates this world, sin would disappear as quickly as some illusion. In the religious discourse of the West, the question of sin and redemption from sin are questions so heavy and burdensome that they begin to oppress the human mind. This only belittles the Power and Presence of God....

In this country, our religious discourse is simple and founded on certain fundamental values. We say: 'He who seeks contentment must exercise self-control.' If a man seeks happiness, he must be prepared to find ways to self-contentment and if he seeks self-contentment, he must exercise self-restraint. The import of this statement is that happiness does not lie outside us. Rather than

remain buried under a mass of worldly acts or artefacts, it surfaces within the pure simplicity of a mind that knows self-control....

India does not advise us to frantically look about for that which we wish to procure: Indian wisdom has never been on the side of mindless wandering. Rather, it suggests that we acquire that which is both inside and outside us, that which is countless, constant, and wholly natural, for that alone is True and Eternal. India recommends that we experience in our inner selves, He who is always located inside us. He whose presence permeates this world must also be experienced within this world. We, who reside in this world of Immortality, must always properly sight the Immortal. That is India's perennial prayer....



9.

THIS WORLD IS FOUNDED ON LOVE*

In the business of our everyday lives, Truth, of which we are generally forgetful, must be especially invoked on the day we organize

* *Source*: 'Utsav' (Festival). First appeared in *Bongodarshan*, Magh 1312 BS/January–February 1906 and later included in the collection *Dharma*, 1315 BS/1908; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 449–52.

our religious festivals and celebrations. Celebrations must bring us all together in common aspirations and action; these are not something that an individual can organize singlehandedly. In fact, whenever we see things as individuals, we tend to lose sight of this Truth....

It is therefore that I say that celebrations cannot be limited to individuals. It is through the coming together of our minds and hearts that Truth is manifest and to experience this Truth collectively marks the fulfilment of our celebrations. The Truth that we seek to experience within us through meditation is that which pervades the entire Cosmos....

The Truth that resides in us is not born of any empirical experience (*vigyan*); rather, it represents Divine Bliss (ananda), aesthetic joy, and love. That Truth is fulsome in nature since it satiates not the mind alone but also the heart. He who draws us together, in whose Benign Presence we are all gathered here, is not some lifeless entity. He is Love. It is this Love that is the presiding deity of our celebrations and our minds and hearts the fully sentient site for His worship.

In our daily lives, we are constantly brought face to face with the power of this Love which is also the Truth. If there be anything on this earth that can fully overcome fear, brush aside all potential danger, remain unaffected by loss or ignore something as inevitable as death, it is this Love. This Love can also overcome all selfish considerations. Those of my compatriots, who cannot unite with one another in good days or bad, have lost sight of the highest Truth available to us. Since they do not know renunciation, no gain comes to them; since they cannot give up their lives for others, life becomes an enigma for them. Such people continue to live their lives in constant fear; suffering humiliation at all times, they move about hanging their heads in shame. What is the reason behind this? This is because such people have attained neither Truth nor Love. That prevents them from gaining in strength. Our ability to acknowledge the potency of Truth is

directly proportional to the degree to which we have experienced Truth ourselves.... Until we are able to sufficiently experience Truth that is manifest in people around us, we shall not be able to dedicate our lives in their service.

It is when Truth appears within us as Love that it reaches fulfilment. Once that happens, we are freed of all doubt, from the agony of death, from selfish expectations, or the fear of personal loss. It is then that our mind is able to locate an unchanging and fulsome Ideal even in this turbulent, ever-changing world....

Satyam gyanamanantam Brahman[1] is what the Upanishads say: Brahman represents Truth, Knowledge, and Eternity. But how do these manifest themselves?

Anandarupammritam yadbibhati: Brahman is manifest as Joy (ananda) and Immortality (*amrita*). That which He reveals is Joy and Immortality, in other words, His Love. This world reveals His eternal Joy and His Love....

In worldly matters, we have occasion to realize that incomplete truth is never fully transparent. On the other hand, we also learn that the more we draw closer to the Truth our love and contentment increases. To the common man, a blade of grass gives no pleasure; for him it is a petty object of which he knows or cares about only a little. For the botanist, however, the same can be quite meaningful. He is aware of the fact that in the evolution of plant life, the place occupied by grass has not been insignificant. He who can look at the blade of grass with a spiritual vision finds ample happiness in it.... Similarly, so long as my knowledge and understanding of man is small and partial, my love for him too remains incomplete. I find my fullest contentment in the man for whom I am even willing to give up my own life. However, this is looking at love purely from my own perspective. My personal interests are so dear to me that I fail to find love in serving others. For the Buddha, however, life was in itself so important and

[1] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, II.1:2.

meaningful that he gave up his kingdom only so that he may serve others.

It is therefore that I say that Truth is born of Joy and Joy, of Truth: *anandamdhyeba khalimani bhutani jayanti*[2]—whatever is born, is born of ananda. Hence, until this world is revealed to us as pure Joy and Love, it is not available to us as the Fullest Truth (*purna satyam*). The Bliss and Love that we experience in this world, we experience as the manifestation of Truth. It is never enough to say that the world simply exists: the Truth is that it is the Abode of Bliss.

How does this Divine Bliss manifest itself? It manifests itself in amplitude, variety, and beauty. In this manifestation we find no paucity, no miserliness, or an attempt to go by pure need or functionality. Look at the fountain of light that is descending from millions and millions of stars in the sky and whatever this light touches comes alive in exciting colour and form. This is the sheer amplitude of ananda. It is immeasurable; its presence far exceeds our requirements....

Today we celebrate Beauty; the gift of Beauty too exceeds our requirements. This is the manifestation of unbounded delight and contentment, again far in excess of what we need. This is the language of Love. Even if a flower was not beautiful in appearance, it would still be cognizable to our senses. The fact that it is also beautiful must be taken as an additional gift. This unbounded generosity expects generosity in return and that which is so returned is love....

[2] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, III:6:1.

10.
THE VALUE OF SUFFERING*

... The Upanishads say that all that is manifest in this world reveals Divine Joy. It is some Perennial Desire that has expressed itself in a myriad of forms. The Upanishads have further divided this revelation into three aspects. One of these has to do with this world, the second with human society, and the third with the human soul. These represent respectively, that which is Serene or Tranquil (shanta), the Good and the Auspicious (shivam), and the One without a second (advaitam).

If the shanta were to remain self-contained, He would be unable to reveal Himself. There is before us this dynamic world, constantly in movement and even amidst this fast movement, He reveals His firmness and serenity through fixed and unchanging laws. It is because He can subsume all this movement within Himself that he remains shanta. Similarly, if shivam too were to remain fixed in Himself, we cannot call Him shivam. In this world, there is no end to work and to our suffering born of such work but it is within all that suffering that He uses his Goodness and Auspiciousness to reveal Himself. It is because this Goodness goes beyond all pain and suffering that it is good and auspicious; it is dharma. Again, if He who was One without a second kept to Himself, how would Oneness be revealed to the world? In worldly life, our minds are constantly affected by immense differentiation and complexities. Even so, He reveals His Oneness through love.

* *Source*: 'Dukkha' (Suffering). Address delivered in 1314 BS/1907 and published in *Bongodarshan*, Phalgun 1314 BS/February–March 1908; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 490–7.

If this love had not forged the unity between souls, how would the One have revealed Himself?

The world is in a state of flux because it is imperfect; human society too has had to constantly engage itself in work because it is imperfect. Again, it is because our self-knowledge is incomplete that we tend to see our soul to be different from everything else surrounding it. All the same, it is within this frenzied activity that there lies tranquillity; it is within our failures that there is success and it is within discord that there is love.

We must take care to remember that the opposite of completeness is void, not incompleteness. In truth, incompleteness is never opposed to completeness; it is simply a partial manifestation. Imagine a song being sung. Now until the time that the lines of a song have not completed a full circle and returned to the starting point, it cannot be called a complete song. However, this is not the opposite of song either because each of its incomplete parts resonate the musical appeal of the entire song.

How else may we savour aesthetic joy (rasa)? *Raso vai swah*[1] says the Upanishads— He alone manifests rasa. It is because He imparts fullness to that which is not full that He is rasa. It is in Him that rasa continues to fill up. He gives both form and quality to rasa. It is thus that the world revelation is so filled with Divine Joy.... It is also on that account that this imperfect world is not some void or illusion. It is hence that the beauty underlying this world, the messages carried in its many sounds and smells, keeps us deeply absorbed in some mysterious feeling. It is thus that the sky does not merely surround us; it also expands our hearts. Again it is not as though light simply enables us to view things; it also awakens our inner self. All that is around us does not simply exist; it enhances our consciousness and embellishes our souls with Truth....

Just as the imperfection of the world is not opposed to perfection, suffering too that accompanies imperfection is not opposed to happiness. In other words, suffering, even when acute, is actually

[1] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, II:7:2.

not suffering but a state of happiness. It is a manifestation of He who is Pure Joy and Immortality....

Is this at all a matter of debate? Does this wisdom not come from our experience? It is because every man experiences this deep inside his heart that he chooses a life of suffering, not comfort. In human history, the most venerable figures have embodied suffering; they were not slaves to the Goddess of Fortune, brought up in a life of ease and comfort. Our own weaknesses should not lead us to devalue the importance of suffering. Through this suffering alone we shall get to experience happiness even better and to acknowledge He who is Benign and the Truth.

We must remember that the glory of imperfection lies in the suffering that it induces; that indeed is its only asset. Humanity itself derives its meaning from the fact that whatever Truth man obtains he obtains through suffering. He gets the objects of his desire not by seeking but by the willingness to endure suffering. All other assets belong to God; it is suffering that exclusively belongs to man. It is through the splendour of suffering that man unites with God, keeping his pride and dignity intact....

If we are required to make a gift to God what is it that we can gift? There can be no satisfaction in gifting Him what only belongs to Him: it is only suffering, man's sole possession that can be surrendered before Him. This suffering He takes away by gifting Himself to us and granting happiness. If there wasn't this suffering to take away from man where else would He place his precious gifts? Does not the value of wealth increase in giving it away? Happiness too finds fulfilment not in self-containment but by giving itself away. It is a matter of pride for us that we contribute to this fulfilment through the suffering that we endure. O Lord, this is the point at which You and I meet, only so that our respective possessions are happily joined together. It is at this point that you cease to be unapproachable; it is now that you descend to the world of men. Having so descended from your splendid throne down to this everyday world, you bring into

effect your Divine Play (leela), only so that we may find some meaning in our lives....

We often try to wish away the burden of suffering by suggesting to ourselves that we could treat happiness and unhappiness at par. Now it may not be impossible for someone to achieve this mental state but matters like happiness and unhappiness are not exclusive to a few people; they affect all others in the world. The world as a whole does not overcome suffering even if some of us do. Hence, we should understand it as a value not just in respect of ourselves but on that vast stage of history where its relentless power is affecting numerous races, states, and communities....

The power or value created by man's suffering is not to be diminished in any way. We shall have to accept it with a brave heart and with our heads held high. We shall use that power not to annihilate ourselves but to strengthen ourselves even more. It would be slighting this Power if we were not to use it to uplift ourselves. It is through this Power that we may truly discover the glory of our souls. Suffering is the only value that has the power to procure everything. Whatever man has created he has created through suffering. That which has not been thus created does not endure.

It is through renunciation—the act of surrendering, penance, and suffering—that we realize our soul in its deepest sense, not through a life of comfort and happiness. Through no other means do we get to know our strengths better than through these experiences. The less we know our own strength, the less we are able to perceive the glory of our souls and shallower become our happiness. The poet of the Ramayana has established the glory of Rama, Sita, Laxmana, and Bharata upon their own sufferings. The joy and the purity we find in the poetic excellence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata is held together by this power of suffering. In the entire history of mankind, all that is courageous and noble is seated upon the power of suffering. The value of motherly suffering lies in her suffering itself as does that of wifely chastity, virility, and all other righteous acts....

Christian scriptures say that God, when born as man, willingly took upon himself the burden of the sins that mankind had committed and a crown of thorns upon his head, representing his suffering. Suffering alone leads to liberation....

In our country, men belonging to certain religious communities have envisioned God as Mother but in some terrible and forbidding images. Nowhere have they tried to soften or tone down this terrible vision and make the image look more agreeable and pleasant. They have understood God as Mother[2] through frightening imageries of destruction. In their spiritual life, they have sought to experience even within this frightening form, the blissful union of Sakti with Siva. Only those who are weak in their devotion have chosen to associate God exclusively with comfort, happiness, and abundance. Such men believe that wealth and worldly fame comes through the grace of God and that worldly success is but God's gift to man in return for his good deeds. The kindness and compassion of God they tend to understand in extremely soft and emotional terms. Such feeble-hearted votaries of success and happiness even begin to take God's kindness as tacitly approving their own greed, infatuation, and cowardice. In so doing, they arrive only at a narrow and fragmentary view of God.

O Terrible! Where are we to put your Kindness and Bliss? Are these to be placed only where there is happiness in plenitude or where life is free of any fear or danger? Shall we begin to understand death or fear only by detaching these from you? That cannot be so. O Father! You are suffering, You are danger too. O Mother, You are death, You are fear too....

O Almighty! I seek only such powers from you that will disallow me to take your Kindness for something that only perpetuates

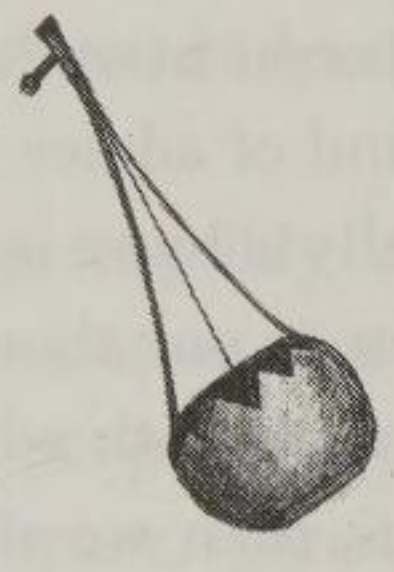
[2] A concept distinctive to Saktas or worshippers of Sakti. Ramprasad Sen and Ramakrishna Parmahamsa may be included under this category. Perhaps under the influence of Ramakrishna, the Brahmo Keshab Chandra Sen too took to this concept minus of course the image worship.

my weaknesses and my insignificance; let me not deceive myself by accepting you only in part.

That Power which is overwhelmingly terrifying as sakti turns Beautiful and Benign at the touch of shanta (the serene). And He who is shanta is also sivam (auspicious). The shanta drives all the dynamism that there is in this world towards some benign conclusion.... All that happens in our lives—births, deaths, happiness and misery, gain and loss—are present in Him. But for Him, who could have carried this burden even for a moment? Today I see Nature—the sun, stars, planets, sky, earth, and water—all eager to give me a helping hand. Even though I do not understand the mystery inherent in a single grain of sand, I remain seated on this vast stage of the world, happily playing away like a child in his own home, unmindful of what goes on around me. Just as I belong to everybody, everybody belongs to me. How did this come about? He who represents the only answer to this question reveals Himself in all that goes on; He protects us. He is sivam, He is Auspicious. In order to truly experience His Auspicious nature, we must be prepared to discard all that which is opposed to it. In short, we have to engage ourselves in good work. There can be no experience in apathy and inaction. It is only by churning the ocean of works that one may secure Immortality and Auspiciousness. We will reach the mansion of Goodness only by experiencing the titanic struggle between the good and the bad, between gods and demons, and by overcoming the many obstacles that come our way in our earthly lives. When by virtue of good works this heart will go beyond all sense of gain or loss, when we shall locate the Benign within our hearts, it shall be revealed to us even amidst all worldly turbulence that He is indeed with us. And then, even the most fearsome signs will fail to frighten us. Even in moments of darkness and utter despondency, when our strength has left us, we will feel His presence who is sivam.

He is non-dual; He is one without a second; He is One.

He who is my relative cannot make me weary, he who is my friend will not obstruct my mind in any way. Only he who is unrelated to me will cause me some pain through his unfriendliness and opposition. The joy that we derive upon uniting with others indicates the state of oneness. Behind all our aspirations, knowledge, or ignorance lie the signs of this oneness. Pure Joy lies only in this oneness....



11.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE IDEA OF AN ASHRAM*

In Christian countries, there now rages a fierce debate on how children are to be introduced to religious education from an early age. Apparently, such a debate is beginning to arise in this country too, and for similar reasons. My friends have invited me to speak on how such education may be carried out within the Brahmo Samaj.

* *Source*: 'Dharmashiksha' (Religious Education), first published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Magh, 1318 BS/January–February 1912 and later included in the collection *Sanchay*; reproduced in RR, vol. 9, pp. 544–6.

In India, there is a general feeling that religion is a desirable thing but hard to experience in our lives. Hence, it is something that we keep seeking and hope to procure cheaply but only after we have met all our other needs. There are many low-priced things in the world that may be obtained with a minimum effort. However, if someone were to ask just how a precious thing could be obtained without paying for it, it must be assumed that that person was contemplating some crime! ...

With respect to religious education it is important that we first carefully ascertain what kind of advice we are seeking. The Gita has ruled that what we finally achieve is determined by the nature of our thought. What, then, is our thought? If we think that we ought not to meddle too much with what already exists and yet fully achieve our objectives, then we shall have to seek the services of such men who claim to be able to turn brass into gold....

Whenever in society the value or understanding of religion heightens, people are willing to sacrifice much in the name of religion.... Under the circumstances, many happily accept the difficult challenges posed by religious life and only when the scope of religion is wide does religious education become easy and natural. On the contrary, when it is only a small part of our everyday life, it becomes difficult to resolve just how such education is to be effectively carried out.

The Brahmo Samaj too has been a witness to such developments as have affected modern societies across the world. Here too our will and intelligence has tended to drive us more towards the world that lies outside us, neglecting what lies inside.... We are citizens of a new age and in our lives there is indeed little that is natural. We have amassed a great number of objects of sensual pleasure and of that we remain proud. For many of us, religion is only a part of society; in fact I have known such people who take religious feeling to be a part of mental infirmity that is to be truly ignored....

There was a time when the task of educating children was everywhere in the hands of religious preachers. There was then

instability in our political system, which disallowed long periods of peace. Hence, there developed in society a special class of people whose only social obligation was to put their minds to religion and scriptures. Society, in turn, took care of them, and over time, this class of people became social instructors. At that time, education was limited in scope, students few in number, and teachers too drawn from a small social circle. Under such circumstances, problems related to education were not particularly difficult or complex. This allowed lay education and the religious to be joined together.

Now conditions have perceptibly changed. With improvements in our political organization, the desire to be educated has increased among common people. So have the opportunities for obtaining education. That apart, there have arisen new branches of learning with the result that lay education could hardly be compared to that offered by our religious preachers. However, old habits die hard and, therefore, lay education continued to be closely bound with religious instruction for a long time. But all that is changing. In entire Europe, there is now a great movement for separating the two. This is by no means natural but for certain reasons separation has become inevitable.

The major reason for this is that, over time, European clergymen, who once nurtured education, became the greatest impediments on the road to educational progress. The more learning diversified and expanded its frontiers, the more it outgrew conventional religion. Under the circumstances, there could but be only two choices: either contemporary religion was to admit its errors and limitations or else dissenting forms of knowledge had to be allowed to go their own ways. It now appears impossible to keep the two united any more. But here is the difficulty. If the scriptures were to admit their incompleteness or error, they would have at once lost all power and influence. It had been the habit with men of religion to propagate the idea that their word was infallible since it was based on Revelation and the willing

assent of an omniscient God. The fact of the matter now is that the new learning that derived its strength and appeal from close observation of the world and of nature can no longer accept the idea of a revealed Truth.

At first, the men of religion sought to win over their opponents by all kinds of unjust acts: people were prosecuted, burnt alive, and ostracized but such methods failed to bring lasting success. Thereafter, they employed sophisticated arguments to prove that conclusions of religion were no different from those of science. Currently, however, the two have become so hard to reconcile that neither state nor society in Europe has been able to keep religious faith under their control. Hence, almost everywhere in the West, lay education is being increasingly detached from religious instruction. It is for this reason that people cannot come to a conclusion regarding whether or not children should be brought up without any exposure to religion.

In our country, this problem has turned serious in recent times since the coming of modern education has seriously weakened our traditional religious faith. In India, matters like the theory of creation, history, geography, and other subjects have traditionally been a part of the religious culture as available in the Puranas. These are so closely tied to mythical tales concerning gods and goddesses that it is extremely difficult to separate the two. Regrettably, it is not only such tales that are hard to reconcile with present-day thought and experience but also social customs as ordained in our scriptures. We are no longer prepared to go by the older ideal but lack a new ideal that can take its place.

This is precisely the nature of the problem that the Brahmo Samaj now faces. With what shall we attract the minds of our children? How shall we expand their intellectual horizons and religious consciousness? It is not enough to have rain, there must also be adequate arrangement to store rainwater for its future use. Our thoughts too are like water; unless contained from all sides, they tend to flow out unproductively. The Brahmo Samaj also lacks the method by which a child's mind may be adequately

trained, an ideal that will hold things together. In order to do away with the indeterminate quality in our present religious life and to give it a more stable basis, some people have now tried to give the religion of the Brahmos a philosophical orientation. Some people are now trying to assess how much of this philosophy is non-dual in character, how far dual or even a combination of both. They are keen to assess how much of it has been influenced by Acharya Sankara, Kant, Hegel,[1] and Green,[2] respectively. In so doing, their intention is to project Brahmoism as a readily identifiable philosophical view, complete in every respect. I have been aware of some non-Brahmos, disrespectful as they are of the Brahmo Samaj, to take Brahmoism as a philosophy, not religion. Unfortunately, our Brahmo detractors are only too willing to accept this unreasonable view with some pride and joy.

On our part we can justly claim that like other universal religions, Brahmoism too has developed out of the devotional outpourings of the human heart. It is not something compiled by some text book committee attached to some religious seminary and randomly sewn together as a book by a bookbinder. That which is based on life will always be on the move. A stone cannot change its form but the same cannot be said of a seed. The seed contains within it a mystery that is larger than itself. If this unknown mystery is mistakenly taken to be uncertainty, one destroys all potentialities of life within it. Whatever one might say, Brahmoism is not a fixed or well-organized philosophy.... It is not like some pond or tank enclosed by masonry; it is a river that will keep flowing with time, quenching the spiritual thirst of successive ages. Many new Hegels or Greens may construct

[1] The German philosopher and major figure in German Idealism, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) revolutionized European philosophy, whose dialectical methodology was a major influence on Karl Marx.

[2] Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) was an English philosopher, politician, and reformer, who made an important contribution to the British Idealist movement.

stone embankments on its course but the river will keep flowing unabated....

If this be the case, what defines the religion of the Brahmos? There are a few general things that it includes: the hunger for the Infinite and the intense desire to revel in its Joy and Beauty. We have no quarrels with the way the Infinite is understood or interpreted. This is but natural and differences of understanding will persist forever. There is no way by which we can get to the bottom of this mystery. The truth, nonetheless, is that from Rammohun to Keshab Chandra, we have witnessed in every major religious figure, this joy born of the quest for the Infinite....

However, to perceive the Brahmo Samaj through the lives of only a few would amount to belittling it. Behind the creation of the Brahmo Samaj we see man's attempt to remove his most deep-rooted failings and deficiencies. Brahmoism was meant to awaken man's entire consciousness through the larger and all-pervading consciousness of Brahman. It was, therefore, that Rammohun's field of activity was entire humanity, not his country alone. His mind was drawn to all directions—to politics, society, and religion. The inspiration behind this was not simply the abundant scope for work but the persistent quest for Brahman. It was because he perceived man through such eyes that he saw him in all grandeur and truth. It was thus that his vision went beyond the boundaries of insularity and narrow conventions. Rammohun desired not the awakening of Indian mind alone but in every such community where men had succeeded in enlarging his sphere of freedom.

Since the inception of the Brahmo Samaj, it is this Truth that we have consistently upheld. If there be an attempt to replace its openness with some special scripture, a special house of worship, a special philosophy, or modes of worship, this is bound to go against the very spirit of Brahmoism....

Before we determine what kind of religious education we ought to impart to our children it is important to determine what

exactly we understand by religion itself. It must be admitted at once that for us religious education does not mean committing a few things to memory or practising certain prescribed customs. We must also not be distracted by the thought that in other religions such matters are far simpler to handle. After all, of what use is it to replace Truth by Truth? Dust is easier to obtain than gold and, hence, is it dust that we should procure? On the whole, it has to be admitted that just as good health has to do with the entire human body, religion too wholly occupies a man's nature and being.

Our spiritual practitioners of old have themselves admitted that spirituality is not a matter of mere learning or pedantry. However, none among them has been able to tell us just how they have reached their spiritual goal. They have been heard to proclaim 'I have known! I have found!' Such men have also told us that he who has known Brahman has attained immortality. But just how they have known Him is a mystery so esoteric that it eludes the spiritual practitioner himself. It is not an experience that he can cogently describe or narrate. Alas, if only they had been able to unravel this mystery, there might have been no room for debate on the subject of religious education. When asked just how God-consciousness was to be fully awakened in man, none of our spiritual masters have chosen to give us any specific religious instruction. Some have asked us to control our passions, to purify our minds and souls, while others have suggested certain external rites: organizing ritual sacrifices, meditating on certain images, or using of stimulants to reach a certain mental state. When attracted to the latter group in particular, it becomes difficult to resist falsehood and giving free rein to our imagination. However, people who give us such advice are also religious men. It is not as though they wish to deliberately mislead us but there is, nonetheless, every possibility that they would have erred in the advice they offered us. To realize an objective is one thing, to offer a rational explanation for how this came about is quite another....

In the Brahmo Samaj we do not seek a new house of worship or a set of unique rites and customs; we simply want an ashram where man's inner quest may be joined to the enchanting beauty of the natural world. It is this joining of the human soul and nature that represents our house of worship, and selfless, public work the worship itself. It is at such a site that religious education is best carried out. I have earlier stated how religious education has to be imparted in keeping with the natural inclinations of our heart; the use of any contrivances or artificial methods will only cause aberrations and pose problems in spiritual life.

I suspect that some people who are given to cut and dry judgements will argue that what we suggest is not in keeping with the spirit of our times. For them, the idea of an ashram is reminiscent of medieval monasteries which only dissipated religious life and crippled humanity.

It would indeed be foolish to emulate that which belonged to a bygone era and has now outlived its usefulness. No matter how attractive the bows used by the barbarians look, they are of no use to present-day warriors. However, even though the weapons of the past are of no use, there still remains in human society the urge to go to war. And as long as that survives, there will remain a broad similarity between wars and war-like instincts manifest across time. Likewise, if the religious feelings in man which assumed a certain form in the past are revived today, it is quite possible that the present will follow in the footsteps of the past without necessarily emulating it. The present will have a certain distinctiveness befitting the present times but also a common spiritual quest since in every age man has sought Truth....

I have not been arguing for the sake of argument. It is well known to you all that my revered father, Maharshi Debendranath, established an ashram in Bolpur[3] at the very spot where he once

[3] Land for this site was acquired in 1863 and the ashram set up on 19 October 1888. In 1892, the Brahmo Mandir was constructed. Rabindranath started his *brahmacharya* ashram in the year 1901.

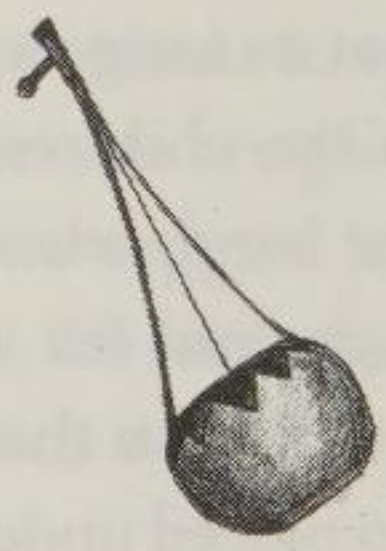
began his active spiritual life. He was not only attached to this ashram but also respectful. Even though that spot remained barren and uninhabited for a long time, he never doubted the fact that the idea of running an ashram had great meaning and relevance ... and one day, when a proposal was placed before him to open a school on the same premises, he happily consented. He felt as though the ashram had all along been awaiting that school. It was also his understanding that the primary responsibility for suitably training the minds of the children belonged to the ashram....

It has been observed that as long as we believed that it was up to us to educate and help the children, we made little progress in the matter. On the other hand, when it dawned on us that the ashram was the training ground for all, that our own spiritual training was no less necessary than that of the boys, that teachers and students alike had been placed under the tutelage of the **Great** Teacher, that things began to change for the better.... Looking at this experience of ours we would have to say that religious education cannot be effectively imparted when one party unilaterally assumes the role of the teacher and takes another to be the student. In the domain of religion, the acts of giving and taking are but identical; they occur simultaneously. Thus, there can be no schools for religious education, only ashrams.

In this country, there was a time when hermitages were used for such purposes. There, lay education and the religious were creatively joined together. There, the acts of giving and taking were carried out with ease and it was thus that the hermitage, assuming the functions of the heart, refined and fortified our society.... Buddhist monasteries too carried out similar work.

Some of you may be led to think that since 11 years of my life have gone into the making of this ashram, revealing its story is only one way of self-approbation. Even at the risk of being so criticized, I must ultimately stand witness for Truth. Most respectfully, yet with conviction in my heart, I must state that religion, which shuns the use of imageries and irrational customs and finds them posing some danger to human character and

intelligence, can never fully win over the human mind through occasional lectures or sermons. To carry that religion to its fruition, we will need an ashram where the unity of nature and the human mind is unhindered, where man remains in close harmony with all other forms of life, when a life of self-seeking indulgence ceases to hold any attraction for man, and where spiritual life, rather than be lost in meditative contemplation, finds expression in renunciation and noble work....



12.

DO HINDUS REMAIN HINDUS UPON ACCEPTING THE BRAHMO FAITH?*

In the essay 'Atmaparichay', I had argued that Hindu-Brahmos were right to call themselves Hindus. In other words, a Hindu remained a Hindu even after formally accepting the Brahmo faith. To this, the esteemed editor of the journal *Tattwakaumudi*[1] has

* *Source*: 'Hindu Brahmo', originally published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Jaistha 1319; reproduced in RR, vol. 9, pp. 724–30.

[1] The organ of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj started in 1878 with Sibnath Sastri as the editor.

responded by alleging that since the members of the Adi Brahmo Samaj (to which I belong) were socially far behind the progressive Brahmos (of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj), they were not competent to judge this question. Further, it has been claimed that 'progressive' Brahmos had long outgrown the narrow confines of Hinduism (Hindutva).[2]

I shall refrain myself from commenting on the extent of 'progress' achieved by various wings of the Brahmo Samaj; that is really not the subject under discussion. All the same, it would be my duty to state that what is unjust or improper for Hindu society as a whole has to be so for Brahmos too.

Possibly, we at the Adi Brahmo Samaj, suffer from many superstitions and it may be reasonably expected that as we increasingly grow aware of these, we shall also try to free ourselves from their hold. However, it was never our belief that the right to determine the truth was exclusive to only certain members of the Brahmo community. I am a member of the Adi Brahmo Samaj and yet God has not taken away my powers of rational thought and analysis. And even though our 'progressive' editor is keen to deny me the right to judge who is a Hindu and who is not, He, from whom we have all received our human qualities, has never questioned me in this regard.

Are those who oppose the wearing of sacred thread (*upavita*) as a mark of caste differentiation prepared to accept the fact that the invisible thread is often more firmly in place than that which is visible? The editor of the *Tattwakaumudi* does not wear one himself but by so proudly appropriating the label 'progressive' for himself and for other members of his community, has he not exhibited a sense of aristocratic disdain and pride of race?

Our editor has claimed that the sheer momentum of 'progress' has taken the 'progressive' Brahmos beyond the boundaries of

[2] 'Adi Brahmo Samaj o Unnatishil Brahmo Samaj' (The Adi Brahmo Samaj and the Progressive Brahmo Samaj), *Tattwakaumudi*, 5 Baiskh 1319 BS/April 1912.

Hinduism. But boundaries that are in no way synthetic or humanly constructed cannot be so easily crossed. For instance, I was born with a certain physical frame and that in turn has given me some distinctiveness. Now if this distinctiveness be considered an offence and opposed to my progress as a social being, then all my efforts to integrate myself with this world will be in vain....

Does this mean that the concept of the 'public' is only an illusion? This would be possible only if the Universal was tantamount to taking away all marks of individual distinctiveness. This would amount to saying that we accept brotherhood without accepting the brother or we arrive at an abstract notion of the public without taking into account the special features of the people that make up this public. Only he who does not possess a head need not worry about a headache! It is because each of us is so distinctive in our own ways that we aim to arrive at some notion of the universal and the public; otherwise there would be no use for it. Acknowledging uniqueness in individuals cannot be an act of prejudice and, hence,

the claim that going beyond the 'narrow' confines of Hinduism constitutes progress is but an empty boast.

Let us illustrate this with the help of an example. All communities believe in the existence of ghosts, albeit in varying degrees. Now, if I were to claim that I have somehow overcome this belief, would it imply that I have ceased to be human?

Likewise, if a Hindu is able to overcome superstitions or prejudices present in his society, one might reasonably call him a Hindu free of superstitions, not un-Hindu. It cannot be claimed that superstitions alone define the Hindu. We must be prepared to admit that blind faith and superstitions prevail in every society but by God's grace they are never eternally present. This allows for progress and no matter how badly affected the members of the Adi Brahmo Samaj are, or for that matter some other community, they too can progress since they are human....

I imagine that by now there would be readers who have lost patience and cannot hold back their anger anymore. Such men

would want to believe that those whom I call Hindus would also be image worshippers and follow the rules of caste. They would happily throw this allegation at me since I do not belong to either the Sadharan or Nababidhan factions of the Brahmo Samaj or because my father, allegedly, had said or done a few wrong things....

Now I cannot forsake my father as a father even if these allegations were true. If, in a moment of temporary insanity, such a thought were at all to cross my mind, it would not be in my power to carry this out. That I am my father's son is an identity that God Himself has determined. However limiting this is taken to be, it remains possible for me to attain progress some day. It is because such possibilities were located in Hindu society too that Hindus have been able to advance through time and will continue to do so. It is because God willed it that way that we witnessed the life and work of Rammohun Roy. Is this not sufficient cause for us to restore our faith in God and continue to have faith in his Dispensation? I am willing to concede that Hindu society harbours error, superstition, and blind faith but importantly enough, it also has on its side, Truth, goodness, and Brahman Itself....

I have previously asserted that Brahmo dharma (Brahmoism) is a byproduct of the history of the Hindus. In other words, no matter how universalistic its character is, it cannot deny Divine Laws which have willed it that way. Hence, there ought not to be any sense of shame or regret about historical ties that determined the birth of Brahmoism at a particular time and place. We would have to acknowledge this if at all we are to respect history, and hence it would only be natural for us to grant that there are certain qualities in the Hindu and in his historical circumstances that has allowed Brahmo dharma to express itself in its own particular way.

The play of several forces may explain this occurrence. Perhaps the challenges thrown out by the West is one of these. It might be true that it was an earthquake that woke me up at midnight

but it was still me that was awakened, not the earthquake itself. It may well be true that the Koran, Purana, the Bible, Buddhist scriptures, and scriptures from the other religious traditions that are there in this world have all contributed to the making of Brahmo dharma, and yet this unique creation was made possible only within the history of the Hindus. Therefore, it is to the Hindus that it must belong....

There are debates about the origin of practically every religion. Some say that Christianity is indebted to Buddhism; others claim that Vaishnavism is derived from Christianity. There are numerous other debates of this kind and perhaps at some point of time the historian will establish that Brahmo dharma too has been put together by stealing ideas or practices from various world religions. However, such debates notwithstanding, Christianity remains Christianity and Vaishnavism remains Vaishnavism. Even allowing for the possibility that Christianity had appropriated Buddhism for its purposes and Vaishnavaism had appropriated Christianity, this has still not resulted in these religions turning extinct or in their glory being severely curtailed. The vitality of life consists of making an outsider one of our own; on the other hand, to willingly lose our identity in something outside us is the sign of death. Hence, regardless of how I judge the matter, and even allowing for a host of influences upon Brahmoism, Indian, and non-Indian, this religion remains the property of the Hindus....

It is a matter of surprise that the editor of the *Tattwakaumudi*, even when tacitly agreeing with me, has chosen to be critical of my essay.[3] At one place he has clearly stated, 'It just cannot be that Brahmoism will remain confined to Hindu society or to people who are Hindus by birth. It should be possible for people all over this world to accept this liberal religion.' I have never

[3] 'Brahmo Dharmer Mula Mat o Abantar Vishaya' (The Core Principles of Brahmoism and Other Redundant Matter), *Tattwakaumudi*, 1 Baisakh 1319 BS/April 1912.

attempted to shut the doors of Brahmoism to keep out people from other countries or cultures nor have I claimed that it will remain confined to the Hindus. All that I have tried to argue is that the Hindu too can be a Brahmo.

The editor of the *Tattwakaumudi* asks if the Jews, Muslims, and Europeans, who have sought the refuge of the Brahmo Samaj, will agree to call themselves Hindus.[4] Now an identity can be of several kinds: there are those communities that are narrowly constituted and those that are not. If I introduce myself as a Brahmo, it does not become incumbent upon me to also call myself a Hindu. An Englishman can stay connected to Hindu society only to the extent of being a Brahmo and that would not be a matter of embarrassment for him. Even as Hindus we take delight in English literature, cure our ailments through the application of Western medical knowledge, and freely use the railways and telegraph. When doing so we do not pause to think whether or not such things have been inherited from our forefathers. In this manner, we find that human achievement belonging to a certain people or community becomes the common property of mankind.

Why should it be difficult for the Englishman, Jew, or Muslim to accept Brahmo dharma as a part of Hindu society when the German scholar (Paul) Deussen openly accepts Vedanta even with the knowledge that it is Indian in origin? Isn't this just the way people embrace Truth? Are the works of Plato taboo outside the frontiers of Greece? Has no Muslim scholar appropriated the philosophy of Aristotle, and upon doing thus were his personal qualities somehow diminished? In truth, it is because that Brahmo dharma has developed by assimilating the fine mental qualities of the Hindu that it has become such an object of attraction for the non-Hindu. If this were not so, it would have remained useless to the modern world, a mere reiteration perhaps of older wisdom.

[4] 'Hindu Kee?' *Tattwakaumudi*, 16 Chaitra 1318 BS/March–April 1912.

In that event, it could not have so clearly reflected some special Divine Dispensation.

The editor of the *Tattwakaumudi* has repeatedly proclaimed and clearly in an agitated frame of mind that for him, Christ, Theodore Parker,[5] Martin Luther,[6] Martineau are all religious teachers (gurus).[7] He might as well have extended this list by a long margin. What he essentially means to say is that regardless of where a religious teacher has discovered or propagated some Truth, he becomes a teacher of that Truth for all mankind. It is precisely for this reason that we do not hesitate to accept Truth from others. But should this be done only selectively? I am willing to accept the Truth in Christianity and Islam but must I, for that reason, disown my own Truth fearing that a Christian may otherwise decline to accept it?

Our editor has stated that so long as we do not know the distinctive qualities of Hinduism, calling ourselves Hindus would be as bad as signing on a blank cheque![8] In truth, such blank spaces may exist in respect of all religious communities. Would it be correct to say that an Englishman has acquired the right to call himself an Englishman because he has a settled opinion on every conceivable issue? ...

[5] Theodore Parker (1810–1860) was an American Transcendentalist and Unitarian Minister, reformer, and abolitionist. He worked on improving penal legislation and the condition of women. He was widely read by Bengali Brahmos. In Tagore's novel *Gora*, a Brahmo gentleman is shown to possess a whole set of Parker's writings, running into several volumes.

[6] Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a German religious figure who started the Protestant Reformation against corrupt practices in the contemporary Church. The Reformation broke the unity of the medieval Church.

[7] 'Bharatvarsher Brahmo Dharma' (The Brahmo Religion of India), *Tattwakaumudi*, 1 Baisakh 1319 BS/April 1912.

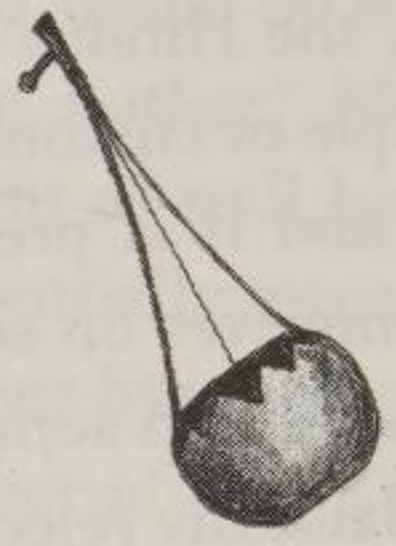
[8] 'Shada Kagoje Sakkhar' (Signing a Blank Cheque), *Tattwakaumudi*, 1 Baisakh 1319 BS/April 1912.

We have earlier tried to argue that the term Hindu does not indicate a particular religion or religious opinion. But should that lead us to believe that there is really no category called Hindu? ... As with other peoples, the Hindus too have had no fixed or immutable religious principle or custom that defines them. There can be no such principle and it is preferable that it stays that way. Those who pride themselves on some unifying principle in religious life are only indulging in some imagined pride. On the other hand, those who disdainfully reject such a principle are also guilty of unreasonableness.

Even within the highly differentiated society of the Hindus, there has been at work an overwhelming Power that has united the non-Aryan and the Aryan, assimilated unto itself the ancient colonies of the Sakas, Hunas, and the Greeks. That Power has inspired us to grasp the grand unity underlying diverse religious faiths and practices. Its field of operation is huge and hence the great difficulties placed on its way. But such obstacles cannot be there for all time: it is because that Power desires to get at the grandest Truth that it has consistently struggled against error and illusion.... If today the historical lessons made available to the Hindu suggest that an underlying sense of unity has indeed been achieved, should we, like ungrateful people, suggest that those who have struggled hard to attain that unity should not be suitably rewarded? For long, it is the Hindu society that has carried the burden of history and now would it be fair to overlook this completely in the name of universalism? Would it be fair to proclaim that the doors of the Brahmo Samaj have been held open for Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and that this has been made possible only by a handful of people, not Hindu society as a whole? ...

I am afraid that this is an ideal that looks like a headless corpse. It has no distinct quality for itself and yet calls the world its own. This is an ideal that ignores the ground under its feet but seeks to meet the world hanging from some empty space. Even

in embracing the world, it hesitates to use its own hands, lest its self-proclaimed universalism is compromised in some way....



13.

INTERPRETING THE WORSHIP OF SAKTI*

My views on sakti worship that I expressed in the essay 'Batayaniker Potro',[1] has provoked protests from several quarters.

In our country, one may discern broadly two trends concerning the worship of Siva and Sakti. One of these is based on scriptures and the other, on folk culture. In the former, Siva is an ascetic and a renunciant, whereas in the folk version, he is an insane and a most undisciplined person. The latter is commonly found in the *Mangal Kavya* literature[2] of Bengal. Even the Siva described by

* *Source*: 'Saktipuja' (The Worship of Sakti), first published in *Probasi*, Kartik 1326 BS/October–November 1919. Later included in the collection *Kalantar* (1937); reproduced in RR, vol. 12, pp. 583–5.

[1] Appeared in the journal *Probashi*, Ashad 1326 BS/June–July 1919.

[2] A genre of hagiographical religious literature produced in medieval Bengal in praise of various puranic or folk goddesses as, for instance, Annapurna, Chandi, Shitala, and Manasa.

the court poet Bharatchandra[3] is not in keeping with Aryan social conventions.

I admit that it is entirely possible to provide a textual and philosophical gloss on the concept of sakti.[4] On the other hand, in the *Mangal Kavya*s, the nature of sakti, coloured as it is by folk culture, is perceptibly different. These works reflect the anxiety of a defeated and marginalized people who attribute their inexplicable pain and suffering to the displeasure of some cruel and capricious Power whom they then proceed to appease.

Historically, man's worship originated in an attempt to overcome the horrors inflicted by a wrathful god. At the time, man could not perceive the cosmic laws at work behind the everyday functions of the world. For that reason he always remained perpetually in a state of anxiety and fear....

At a time when works like the *Kavikankanchandi* and the *Annadamangal* were written, human society was subjected to considerable instability and turbulence. Everywhere, there was the clash of opposing powers and none could tell what lay in store for him. Evidently, those who were able to sufficiently please the gods prospered even when he failed to separate truth from untruth and just from unjust acts. Attempts to secure personal salvation by pleasing the goddess Chandi[5] was an integral part of contemporary religious culture and, usually, it was the class of the rich and the mighty who supported this since they were also the people mostly involved in the struggle for power.

Without adequate supporting evidence, it is difficult to establish the view that the god described in the scriptures is the god as originally conceived and that the folk versions are a relatively

[3] A major poet of late medieval Bengal, Bharatchandra (1712–1763) has authored several works in the Mangal Kavya genre.

[4] Literally, power but also a metaphysical principle employed in both Vaishnav and Sakta traditions. She is also taken to be the Creatrix.

[5] She is a terrifying form of Sakti; in the *Markendaya Purana* she is seen battling the *asura*s.

modern adaptation. I believe that in this country there came a time when non-Aryan gods were progressively Aryanized. However, the gods that made their way to upper-class culture still carried many discordant elements in their character. Even today they carry certain remnants of both Aryan and non-Aryan cultures and in everyday life, the non-Aryan elements are visibly stronger.

Similar developments may be found in the history of Christianity. There was a time when Jehovah was quite partial to the Jews. That he was also an extremely cruel, a demanding, and a vindictive god is amply revealed by a reading of the Old Testament. However, under the influence of Jewish holy men, and finally of Christ himself, he turned into a universal god of love. But that he still carries conflicting elements is evident in everyday religious life. Even today he is the god of war and of human greed and avarice, and is most certainly a sectarian god. The extent to which Christians have persecuted non-Christians

in his name is still unparalleled.

In our country Saktaism and Vaishnavism broadly constitute two autonomous forms of worship. In one of these there is animal sacrifice and the consumption of meat, and in the other, non-violence and vegetarian diets. Such differences are not without significance. Regardless of how certain works may interpret the word '*pashu*' (animal) or other esoteric rites connected with sakta worship, these are not to be found in common public life. Hence, in my writings, I have accepted the commonplace meaning of the word sakti, a meaning that is associated with many symbols, rites, and amply manifest in the Mangal Kavya literature of Bengal.

We must remember though that Sakti would be the revered ideal for dacoits, thugs, and *kapalik*s. It is also important to bear in mind that Sakti worship permits animal sacrifice in order to secure personal objectives. Such worship also accommodates prayers ranging from seeking a questionable victory in litigation to that

desiring the extermination of all rivals or enemies. It was not my intention to examine whether or not there is in sakta works a deeper justification of Sakti worship outside the joining of a cruel deity and the immoral self-gratification of the devotee. We cannot overlook that meaning attached to Sakti worship that is deeply interwoven with popular culture. In folk ballads and allegories, this is indeed the predominant meaning, and everywhere, whether in civilized countries or the uncivilized, Sakti worship is equated with power. Such worship does not put to shame that which is unjust and false and it is still driven by greed and uses violence as the method of worship. In contemporary Europe, which avidly worships power, there is already an attempt to justify this greed. Rather than be something bad, they claim greed is god since it meets the requirements of the innately aggressive man. And since we have accepted the tutelage of Europe, such thoughts are being echoed here as well. On this question I have written elsewhere. Suffice to say here that in 'Batayaniker Potro' I have merely drawn attention to the concept of Sakti as commonly understood and this, I have to say, is little apart from naked self-aggrandizement and forcibly sacrificing he weak at the altar of the powerful.

All the same, it must be admitted that we ought to respect the higher ideals of any religious tradition as they survive in some scripture or in the life and work of some religious figure. In truth, such ideals must be taken to be higher than commonplace behaviour. It is always wiser to judge a religion in the light of its refinements than sheer spread or following....

14.
THE MYSTICS OF MEDIEVAL INDIA*

... When a poet experiences Truth, he realizes that the manifestation of Truth is naturally beautiful. Hence, when he seeks to deal with the nature of Truth, he takes his mind away from all extraneous matters. In Vaishnav poetry, there is the suggestion that when Radha longs to unite with Krishna, she refuses to put on even her necklace, lest that prove to be a distraction. To her, Krishna alone is the Truth and the object of desire.

As in society, so also in literature we encounter people steeped in gross materialism. A materialist is easily made out by his excessive attachment to objects of even cosmetic value, especially because he simply cannot get at the Truth.

When I was trying to locate purity and aesthetics in Hindi poetry, with which I was hitherto unfamiliar, I happened to hear from Kshitimohan Sen a few verses in the Hindi language from Gyandas, a poet belonging to the Baghel Khand region. 'I have at last got what I had been seeking,' I exclaimed to myself, 'this is the authentic stuff and truly sublime and there is nothing that will surpass these.'...

Through the help of Kshitimohan, I began to be acquainted with other saint-poets of the Hindi-speaking region. Today, there is no doubt in my mind that the kind of lyrics that once appeared in Hindi literature was of a very high order. However, some of

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's Introduction to 'Dadu' edited by Kshitimohan Sen. First appeared in *Probasi*, Bhadra 1332 BS/August–September 1925; reproduced in Roy, *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Dharmachinta*, part II, pp. 253–9.

this poetry still suffers from neglect. This poetry must be recovered and suitable arrangements be made through which people from the non-Hindi-speaking areas too begin to appreciate its true worth.

In this poetry the aesthetic feeling that has been most intimately expressed is the love of God. We are familiar with similar poetry in European literature but find that it produces empty noises mostly. This explains why Christian religious songs could not enter the mansion of lay literature but remained confined to the chapel. The truth is that the god described in the scriptures is the god of the orthodox. We may compose verses in praise of this god or follow prescribed ritual acts or methods through which we are asked to approach him. But there is also the God that the devotee has perceived in his soul, the God who elicits unsolicited love and bliss and the God whom we celebrate in our songs. Truth may be worshipped through Beauty alone; the mythical Lord Vishnu, on the other hand, is pleased only by playing upon the *veena*.[1]

At one place, the poet Wordsworth has regretfully observed that we are involved with the world more than is necessary. In truth, our attachment to the world is not strong or intimate but somewhat loose and superficial. We tend to view the world partially, only in keeping with our changing requirements. We never focus all our attention on this world. Our relation with it varies; it could be firm but at times also tenuous and even conflicted....

In one of my earlier writings, I have tried to explain how our most sublime happiness comes when we act outside our petty interests and needs.... There is a difference between creativity and its opposite, which we must acknowledge. In creativity, the many appears to us as One, and when this is not the case, we tend to see matters in disparate ways. Society is one of man's greatest creations and socially every man tries to see his oneness with fellow human beings. There is, on the other hand, the crowd or a

[1] A heavy, stringed instrument. In Hindu mythology, the veena is typically associated with the sage Narada, a great devotee of Vishnu.

gathering of men in which every man pushes and jostles his way around so as to express his individuality.... But whereas the mansion is a creation, a heap of bricks represents its non-existence, and where bricks are crumbling down from a broken wall, there is simply the reversal of creation.

This unity that I have spoken of is not simply the coming together of various objects; there lies within this an unknown and indescribable mystery. The pleasure that we derive by looking at a flower does not lie within it alone; its beauty lies in some deeper Truth which harmonizes all objects in this universe. This Truth provides man with happiness and inspires him to create.

The God that the medieval saint-poets perceived is not the one described in our scriptures. Rather, He is the one who is located in human minds and hearts. Hence, his worship was not carried out through the chanting of some mystic syllable (mantra). Instead, he was invoked through songs. It was because He was directly manifest as Truth in life that he could also be manifest as natural and beautiful in poetry....

In the songs that our saint-poets composed or sung, this had been the source of inspiration. They had perceived Rama, the One and the Blissful in their very hearts. Most of these poets were untouchables by caste who never could possess the textual knowledge of the scholars or any familiarity with ritual conduct or customs followed by the faithful. It was because they were denied entry to temples that they looked inwards, into their own hearts. There are several terms originating in our scriptures that they have used wrongly, evidently out of sheer ignorance. The meaning that they gave to such terms does not at all conform to those given in the scriptures. Their Rama is not a character borrowed from some Purana. Even the great saint Tulsidas[2] was

[2] Major sixteenth-century Vaishnav poet from upper India, he is the author of the extremely popular text *Ramacharitamanas*. Tulsidas was a poet and saint of the saguna bhakti tradition as opposed to the nirguna bhakti of Kabir or Dadu.

irritated by their unorthodox ways of worship. Quite naturally, he failed to see the excellence of such poetry because he read these from the perspective of the orthodox society.

The poets that I speak of constitute a special class. From Kshitimohan I gather that in our country, they are called maramiya (mystics).[3] Such men stirred the very souls of men and it is from this that their poetry took birth. To them, Truth came not in some ornamental rhetoric but as the very outpourings of the soul. Those of us who prefer to travel only on conventionally prescribed paths are likely to believe that whatever these saint-poets create is close to a state of delinquency or madness. And yet their poetry contains Truths that are capable of transcending time and space. Wood taken from any tree may catch fire. However, the firewood that these men obtained was taken not from some particular place but from all that was around them. When sunlight falls on the leaves of a tree, they start drawing carbon from the atmosphere by virtue of some power inherent in them. Likewise, these mystics, no matter where they are located, had the power to draw upon natural elements to give expression to their most intimate feelings. Their Truth was not gathered from the pages of any manuscript and it is for this reason that their message appears so fresh and simple.

The Infinite cannot be comprehended through mere knowledge and hence the sages say that not having found Him, the mind returns to itself. By taking away all the mystic quality surrounding the Infinite, people recreate Him as the god of some particular community, the god as described in scriptures, a god stipulated in some memorandum of agreement drawn up by some people, a god relegated to pathways and marketplaces. This commonplace god is the one who grants boons, rescues the endangered, a god who is put on a frame like a picture, a god hard as a rock concealed in our fists, and which we may use to break each other's

[3] In all probability, a derivative of the word '*maram*' which loosely translated is the inner chamber or the heart.

heads. The god of the maramiyas is a very different god; He is the Lord of the Heart.

The wise say that He may be obtained through bliss and contentment, not knowledge alone. In other words, when the heart feels the Infinite, it also begins to perceive Him as Immortality (amrita) and it is through this intimate aesthetic feeling that all our doubts are taken away. The poet Shelley sung songs in praise of this feeling and similar songs can be heard in the voice of our maramiyas. That which is mysterious is an area of darkness for knowledge; for the heart, however, this holds unbounded joy. It is through this joy that the heart is able to directly acknowledge the Truth of the Infinite....

Only he who has not savoured this feeling of Immortality is subject to the feelings of fear, hunger, or overbearing authority. He acknowledges only that god who rewards the faithful and punishes the wicked. This is the god to whose right is heaven and to the left, hell. He is the distant god who governs the universe by issuing strict orders. He is the god who can be pleased by sacrificing animals, the god for whose sake the world may be deluged in blood, and in whose name are perpetuated such acute differences between man and man, indifference and tyranny.

The maramiyas of India freed the mind of the devotee from the hold of scriptural authority. Their mission was to use tears of ecstatic love to wipe clean the blood-stained courtyards of our temples. They were the emissaries of that Rama whose appearance lights up our hearts and removes all distinctions between men.... The legacy of these gifted men is still at work. Whenever I see the loving bonds between Hindus and Muslims in this country, I at once realize that it is they who made this possible.... The descendants of the maramiyas still wander about in the villages of Bengal, singing songs to the accompaniment of the *ektara*.[4] That single string of the ektara represents oneness. Understandably,

[4] One-stringed instrument commonly used by Baul singers while singing.

the orthodox are up in arms against them. However, those who have survived long years of neglect and tyranny are unlikely to give in to threats of social authoritarianism.

Since Indian society is vastly differentiated with its many languages, religions, and races, her essential message is to forge social unity. The greatest men that this country has produced attempted to build bridges of understanding between one man and another. It is because ritual and customary observances have weighed upon us so heavily that our greatest objective should now be to overcome these differences and acknowledge the inner Truth....

It is not as though the men who carried this message were always respected in this country. Having failed to wipe them out completely, people have resorted to tendentious imagination, putting an orthodox gloss on their life and work. This is but natural because such men were never a part of orthodox society just as Christ himself was a Jew, outside the society of the Pharisees.[5] However, just because they have long suffered social neglect in this country cannot be a reason to call them non-Indians. They were the true Indians, if there were any. They united Hindus and Muslims not out of some practical necessity but because of the pure love and goodwill of their hearts. They alone were able to demonstrate in their spiritual lives, the wisdom of our ancient sages who believed that he alone knows the Truth who can perceive himself in all others....

It is the wisdom of our ancient sages that has now been revealed to us in the life of Rammohun Roy. In the light of the Upanishads which he mastered, Rammohun was able to perceive the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Christian in their true identities. His intelligence and the magnanimity of heart enabled him

[5] Pharisees could represent a political party, a social movement or a school of thought among Jews in the second century BCE. Though the New Testament suggests sharp differences between Christians and Pharisees, this was not always so.

to preach the unity of man in a country marked by acute social differentiation. And in trying to preach the doctrine of unity and non-differentiation, Rammohun brought down upon himself the wrath of his own people. Such people too have dared to call him a non-Indian who possess no knowledge other than that emanating from the West. But the very fact that such a man has been born among us goes to prove that the quest for Truth once voiced by Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu has still not deserted us....

II

DISCOURSES, PUBLIC ADDRESSES, AND INFORMAL TALKS

1.

THE PRIMACY OF THE SOUL*

... For birds and animals to survive it is enough to know of ways to gather food and to stay away from danger. Once these skills are learnt, they are ready to live out their worldly life. The case with man is different. Since man is a social animal, he has to prepare himself for carrying on with his personal life as well as make himself socially worthy.

And yet, calling man a social animal may not be enough. Man also possesses a soul and once we begin to identify man with a soul, he cannot be seen as a social being alone. Those of us who have viewed man in this light say:

atmanam viddhi: know thyself[1]

For them, experiencing one's soul was the highest spiritual objective of man.

* *Source*: 'Tatah Keem' (What Are We to do Next?), address delivered at Overtoun Hall, Calcutta, before a special discussion group, 1313 BS/1906. Later included in the collection *Dharma* (1908); reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 503–16.

[1] *Katha Upanishad*, I.3.1.

Inferior life forms always follow the ways of those above them. For man, the social being, personal life has to follow rules and conventions laid down by society. For the animal, it is only natural to eat when hungry but man has often to curb such natural instincts. For the sake of society, he is prepared to overcome hunger or thirst, and at times he has taken this to be a part of his moral and religious duty. For man, martyrdom is considered a high ideal. Evidently then, to regulate one's personal life with an eye on social needs is considered a part of a man's education. Put simply, liberation becomes the prime objective before man; his personal life and social responsibilities are expected to follow this objective. Understandably, people have tried to model their educational ideals in keeping with their perceptions of the worth of man: the objective in every case was to train man in the ideals of manhood....

The religious leaders of medieval Europe propagated the idea that there was nothing eternal or unchanging in life and that, therefore, it was preferable to renounce worldly life as something unholy and insubstantial. At the time, ascetics wielded greater power and influence. Presently, the thinking in Europe is very different. Europeans are now inclined to believe that calling this world insubstantial and positing a perpetual conflict between life affirmation (pravritti)[2] and abnegation (nivritti)[3] only leads to the emasculation of humanity. They believe that for the worldly, the greater duty was to produce public welfare. And if this be accepted seriously, there is simply no scope for dismissing this world as a mere illusion. In their view, working energetically and wholeheartedly to the end of one's days represents true courage. To the Englishman, it is an honour to work unceasingly and to even die at work.

[2] The attitude of an active engagement or association. In Hindu metaphysical language, this is often taken to represent worldliness.

[3] The opposite of pravritti, representing withdrawn attitude and abstinence; often associated with and leading up to world renunciation.

By denying the idea of an ephemeral world, by brushing aside the fear of death and by remaining actively engaged with the world, Europeans have acquired a special strength. The opposite of this they would call morbid. Hence, their educational ideal is to train their students in such a way that will prepare them to fruitfully struggle on the stage of life. They essentially know life as a struggle; their sciences too teach them that only those who emerge victorious in the acute competition for life and livelihood survive on this earth.... For them it is a hero's death to die clinging on to their worldly possessions, refusing to let go even an inch. Their motto is to know all, to conquer all, and to keep all for oneself. In India, however, we have said a very different thing: 'Carry out your duties in life as though death has you in his hold.'

It is not as though ascetics in Europe have not said similar things for they too have vividly portrayed the horrors of death in literature and art so that ordinary householders are kept perpetually in fear. There is, however, something distinctive in the way the idea has been conveyed in our literature. There can be some debate on the question of whether it is a good idea to work with the assumption that our relations with the world can never end. Now even if for the sake of practicality we were to parade truth as falsehood, it continues to work unceasingly. Even a king who takes the golden royal staff in his hands to be the ultimate truth has to lose it someday. The man who considers public fame or reputation to be the ultimate value has to ultimately part company with the public. Great human achievements are lost forever in history and even the most successful or mightiest of races stop advancing at some point in time. All that is old wisdom but nonetheless true.

However, just because all our relations come to an end someday it should not lead us to deny them even before they are ended. That which ceases to be true at some point in time was true earlier....

A student does not keep going to school all his life; one day his course of study comes to an end. All the same, so long as he remains a student, he has to take his course of study seriously. Only then is his education truly completed. If he ends his course of study prematurely, the consequences of that will stay with him all his life. It is true that the path is not the destination, and yet unless we complete our journey, the road never comes to an end. Evidently, we cannot destroy our worldly relations; rather we cross them as we travel along our paths. In so doing, we arrive at the point where all paths meet. The substance of this argument is that to keep travelling along our paths is important, not shying away from our relationships in the knowledge that they are not forever to stay....

In truth, acceptance and rejection are equally true. One lives in the other; neither is complete by itself. Our fulsome experiences may be derived only upon joining the two. Lord Siva is the symbol of renunciation and Annapurna,[4] his consort, of worldly indul-

gence: it is only when these two unite that there comes the joy of fullness. In our lives, whenever the two are separated, whenever world affirmation and liberation are not established together, whenever there be a conflict between desire and the conquest of desire, then comes turmoil and unhappiness. It was the wish of our ancient text writers that in Hindu society the contrary forces of Siva and his consort be unified. They found that in the entire cosmos Truth and Beauty came through reconciling pairs of opposites: acceptance and rejection, attraction and repulsion, centrifugal power and the centripetal, the woman and the man. Having discovered this Truth they tried to model society along those lines....

If we wish to once again bring about this reconciliation, we must begin by looking upon fellow men with civility. In other

[4] In Hindu mythology, a benevolent goddess and consort of Siva. As her name suggests, the goddess is taken to fulfil the needs of food in every Hindu household.

words, we must stop looking at another man selfishly, as merely an instrument meant to fulfil our special needs.... If we see a tree as only firewood, we fail to pay adequate attention to its flowers, fruits, and leaves which are also integral to it. Similarly, if we were to view man as only the guardian of the state, we will turn him into a mere soldier; if we see him as the means to increase our national assets, we shall turn him into a merchant. It is not as though there is simply no good in doing this but, ultimately, there is more harm than good when we lose sight of that delicate balance.

That in our country a man was seen to be above all practical needs of a society may be seen in the following verse from Chanakya:[5]

> *tyajadekam kulasyath gramasthay kulam tyajet,*
> *gramam janapadsyarthe atmarthe prithivim tyajet.*
>
> The human soul is larger than the clan, the village, the country, and even the entire world.

Hence, we must detach the soul from some specific value it may have in space and time. We must begin to perceive it in its larger and purer form. Only then will we be able to determine its true place in everyday life.

In our country, this is exactly what was done. The authors of our religious texts perceived the human soul in the largest terms. There was no limit put to man's status and dignity and his final destination was taken as union with Brahman. Nothing else was seen worthy of representing the end of a man's journey....

[5] Chanakya (370?–283 BCE) was an Indian teacher, philosopher, and royal adviser. He was also known as Vishnugupta and Kautilya. His best-known work is the *Arthashastra* (date uncertain) that deals with political economy and statecraft. Many *shlokas* (verses) attributed to Chanakya are also in circulation. The cited verse is probably from *Chanakya Shatakam* but also occurs in the Mahabharata, Sabhaparvan, 62.10.14.

It is because the sages of ancient India chose to see the human soul in this light that the ideals of this life were markedly different from those prevalent among Europeans. Our sages did not consider it glorious for a man to keep working until his last day. Rather than take work to be the highest human objective, they focused on reducing the burden produced by work through performing such work that carried no burden. They were never in doubt about the fact that the liberation of the soul was the only worthy objective before man.

Europe sings the glory of freedom all the time. This freedom includes the freedom to possess, the freedom to enjoy one's possessions, and the freedom to work. These are by no means small ideals and it takes a great deal of power and organization to protect them. But the sages of ancient India had chosen to ignore even such freedom. Such freedom they had not taken to be freedom at all. India was keen to attain freedom even in respect of all work and desires.

However, freedom is not a matter of Free Will. To attain this, a man has to subject himself to such rules that take away freedom. If, in a nation, political freedom is valued the most, then one must be free as a soldier but remain subordinated as a merchant. England has several millions of soldiers but are they free? Those who have turned humanity into an apparatus for killing human beings are but an active embodiment of a gun. Millions of English workers found working in dark mine pits or next to hot furnaces located in factories are daily shedding their blood for the sake of England. Are they free? In truth, they are only the active parts of an otherwise inert machine. How many in Europe have truly experienced freedom? How, then, are we to define freedom? Individualism may be a matter of great public interest in Europe; on the other hand, has there been greater subjection of man by fellow man anywhere else?

In our country too, individualism and human freedom were once matters of public concern. But that was no ordinary freedom;

its sole ideal was human liberation. India tried to make this liberation possible through every individual life as well as through social relationships. Just as Europe had attained individualism by struggling against social control, in our country too liberation was taken forward by battling several socially obnoxious customs or habits....

When a nation passes through bad times, it tends to lose its most valued possessions. Their place is taken by trivial matters and when that happens, the bird may be said to have flown, leaving the empty cage behind. This is exactly what has occurred in this country as well. At present, we scrupulously follow prescribed rites and regulations, losing sight of our prime objective. We no longer pursue the goal of liberation and instead remain bound by numerous social taboos and customs. This has resulted in our losing out at every step not only our own cherished ideal but also that of individual freedom greatly valued in Europe....

The truth is simply this: if we remain committed towards our objective of attaining liberation, following certain social rules or conventions would be vital. In India, there was indeed a time when man was strictly bound by rules and conventions but that was done in the hope that it was through his social life itself that man would one day transcend society. Why do we put a rein on the horse and why does the rider connect himself to the horse through the stirrup? He does this because he knows that the horse will have to run at a brisk pace and cover a good distance before it reaches the destination. India knew that society was not the highest ideal for a man or the prop on which he had to eternally depend. The function of society was merely to facilitate a man's journey towards liberation. India had all along emphasized on the social ties of a man only so that he may be freed of them one day.... One has to cross over death before aspiring to Immortality. We cross over death through our social lives. First, we must sufficiently motivate ourselves to remain active in this world and it is only when these are exhausted through sustained

engagement that we can think of realizing Brahman. No one can lay claim to Immortality by declining to undergo social life. In order to attain fullness in life, a man needs to commit himself to a full and active life. It is when life naturally comes to an end that we truly overcome the need for life; it is only when our worldly activities come to a halt that the ties of bondage produced by action become loose....

It is only when we take the world to be permeated by the presence of Brahman that it loses much of its horrors. It can no longer keep us in captivity. And once we take our worldly possessions and enjoyment to be the gift of God all our differences and conflicts come to an end. Hence, an attempt to understand our daily life and work in relation to Brahman is the first step towards social organization and social life. It is with this understanding that attempts were made to regulate Indian society; the objective being the liberation of the human soul. In this country, the human body was not subjected to torture and pain under the belief that it

was impure or unholy; society was not given up in the belief that it was somehow tainted or life itself ignored since it happened to be short. We tried to make all of these complete and fulsome in the light of Brahman.

The life of the European may be divided into two stages. First, there is the stage of learning followed by that of work. And with that, his life ends. But work cannot be an end in itself. Our work must conclude with something. The use of power cannot result in power; it must secure a larger objective. Our aim cannot be to merely put firewood into the stove; it is actually to cook. In Europe, this was not allowed to happen. On the contrary, work itself continued interminably. If someone wanted to hoard money, he kept doing this endlessly; similarly, if someone wanted to gather information, there was no end to that either. People in Europe have taken human civilization to represent continuing progress but somehow that word itself has now come to mean an unending journey with no destination in sight. It is not the game itself but

the chase that gives the greatest delight to the European. We too have believed that man is never contented with what he has. No matter how much a man possesses, his mind always wants more. Hence, India came to believe that there has to be a point at which all desires had to end even though worldly life itself would not. From the time it came into existence, this world has passed through successive waves of success and decline. But since a man's life must end someday what is it worth if he departed from this world without having experienced something fuller, something larger than himself? ...

It is important that we renounce since it is in giving up that we ultimately gain. This is the essential Truth of this world. A flower must shed its petals for it is only then that the fruit will start appearing; similarly, a fruit has to drop down from a tree for it is only then that it will give birth to a new tree. The child in the mother's womb has to leave the womb in order to be born. At birth, the child draws sustenance from itself but after a stage; when its sense organs, its wit, and intelligence increase to a certain point, it has to take a new birth in society....

Our ancient lawgivers tried to give our learning and everyday life a sense of direction. They tried to prepare our lives in keeping with its most cherished objectives. It was thus that our education was not confined to bookish knowledge or the study of physical phenomena. Its defining quality was the insistence on brahmacharya. Through self-control and the regulation of our senses we were able to acquire powers that were useful both in our day to day lives and in renunciation. It is said that a spiritual discipline regulated our entire lives because its goal was to obtain liberation in Brahman. Hence, the education that was imparted was also in the nature of a spiritual vow. This vow had to be carried out with respect, dedication, and utmost care. It was thus that the student took his first step towards social life, always placing before him the Truth, the Truth that was most covetable for man.

One may well ask if this was the ideal that all people in a country were required to follow. In reply, I would ask the following: 'When a lamp is lighted, is it the whole lamp that burns?' The ideals of any country, whether they be related to everyday life or religious duty, are best revealed only by some people. It is only the wick that catches the flame, and yet that is taken to mean the lamp being lighted. Likewise, when certain people in a nation fully internalize certain values, the whole nation is benefited. In fact, the entire society contributes to make this possible. When the branches of a tree begin to bear fruit, the trunk and the roots too have a role to play. If in India, there ever comes the day when our best minds will make Truth and Goodness their highest assets, this is bound to impart a momentum and strength to the nation as a whole. When our ancient sages were absorbed in the contemplation of Brahman, everywhere, whether in the field of governance, commerce, literature, art, or in religion, the idea of Brahman had ruled.

We realized liberation through work. At the time, all of India had exclaimed in the manner of Maitreyi:[6] *yenaham namritam syang kimham tyen kuryat*? (what shall I do with that which cannot give me Immortality?).[7] If we begin to think that that this ancient message has now fallen silent or is no longer relevant, why then are we wasting our time and energy in reviving this dead society? In that case, we might as well imitate the ways of a different race; that way, we will at least produce something new rather than languish in inactivity....

These days it has become fashionable to play Indian music alongside the Western in social events like marriages. I dare say that this produces only unpleasant music and jarring disharmony in musical notes. If we pay adequate attention to the matter it

[6] The second wife of the sage Yajnavalkya in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.*

[7] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, II.4.3.

will be apparent to us that whereas the sombre and delicate notes of the *shehnai*[8] reflect our festive moods, the loud, harsh sounds coming from a pot-bellied drum fail to reproduce this. Such a thoughtless mixing of matters that are otherwise mutually incompatible now appears to be replicated in many other aspects of our social life. We have been mesmerized by the power and affluence of European civilization; by superficially imitating the West, we are led to make only empty boasts....

Until this point in time, we were never given to such follies. Today, we are out in some marketplace, shouting and jostling each other. We are vulgar, we are quarrelsome, always fighting over our social esteem or status. We now use bold print and loud advertisements to advance ourselves over other people. But all this is false; there is very little truth in what we do. Here there is no peace, no dignity, no self-control born of good culture, and no beauty either. Before this age of imitation dawned upon us, there was natural grace and dignity that we had come to acquire for ourselves. We were contended even amidst poverty; the use of coarse food and coarse clothing would not lower our dignity. Just as the warrior Karna[9] in the epic Mahabharata was born with armour, there was a time when Indians too were naturally protected by this sense of self-respect and dignity. That allowed us to withstand poverty and the loss of freedom. This self-respect and dignity was not something that we acquired from the outside; it was a part of ourselves.

Who has now robbed us of our protective armour? Having lost it we are now unable to protect ourselves and stand humbled and humiliated before the world. Today we feel ashamed if there be the slightest flaw in our manner of dressing or in the way we

[8] A wind instrument especially played on auspicious occasions.

[9] A gifted warrior and eldest son born to Kunti, mother of the Pandavas. Karna is one of the tragic heroes of the epic, Mahabharata, slain in battle with Arjuna.

organize our daily lives. It is because the sense of self-respect and dignity now seems to lie outside us that we are so eager to acquire public recognition. That civility which was once integral to our very being has now become a commodity, to be procured in shops selling shoes or clothes, in horse-marts or motor workshops. Where and when are we going to put an end to this? We had once taken the contentment of the soul to represent the highest human happiness. Now that appears to be located in marketplaces and roadsides....

If only some among us were to rise and declare with confidence that half-hearted attempts, maddening competitiveness, or the lure of wealth was never our preferred objectives! Rather, we believed that life and work had to end in some positive conclusion and it was the attempt to realize that conclusion that made human life worth what it was....

I do not think that what we call our preferred objectives were meant only for us. It cannot be that just because we are poor today we should employ some means to conceal our poverty. The ideal given by our ancient sages were not meant for any particular community. This is the only ideal that there can be and capable of producing well-being for all. Before this Ideal, the several assets of the affluent, the power of a nation, the personal wealth of a king, the prosperity of a merchant are all petty and insignificant. Man's soul must triumph; man's soul must be free. Only then will all human effort be worthy and for a just cause. If not, we shall forever keep wondering what to do next....

2.

THE SOLITARY PATH TO SPIRITUALITY*

It must be admitted that we have not been able to fully appreciate the wisdom offered by the holy men of this world who have founded various religious sects and communities. Not only have we failed to understand them but it is quite probable that we have even misunderstood their teachings. Having substituted religion by sectarian feeling, we quite naively rest contented with the thought that we have thereby proved our worth.

One reason for this to happen is that we do not all possess the same powers of comprehension. The pathway on which my mind travels with ease may prove difficult for another. We are naturally attracted to the idea of constructing a common pathway for all, overlooking the different mental dispositions in men since this renders our task simpler. However, such an enterprise has not succeeded yet, nor is it likely to succeed. This is a truth that has still not dawned on us. Quite mistakenly, we consider it beneficial to the world that all men be made to travel along the same road. We express surprise when someone objects to such arrangements for we come to believe that a person who so objects has either given up all that is good for him or else that he suffers from a mental disability which is justifiably ignored.

However, no trick that we may employ will take away the unevenness in pace and movement that God Himself has created among men. All movement may lead to a common goal but the

* *Source*: 'Mahapurush' (Holy Men), address delivered in Magh 1313 BS/January 1907. Later included in the collection *Charitrapuja*; reproduced in RR, vol. 2, pp. 803–6.

paths available are many. All rivers flow into the ocean but fortunately for us, they do not all take to the same path.

God will never permit us all to travel along a common path. He will never render our path so simple that it may be possible for one man to blindly follow another. He will never put up with the state where a man, no matter how powerful he is, will create a single system for all men to follow and which will kill all human initiative and reduce man to inert matter.

It is, therefore, that in the deep recesses of the human mind God has allowed for autonomy where no man has hold over another. It is here that the seeds of immortality are stored and it is here that every man must prove worthy of himself on the strength of his own powers. He who is tempted to give up this autonomous domain for the sake of something apparently simpler ends up in losing all. Such a man, having replaced religion by sectarianism, God by some guru, personal experience by scripture, keeps sitting complacently at one spot with their eyes shut. Actually, it might have been safer had he stayed sitting at one spot. The fact of the matter is that he also seeks out followers and in so doing contributes towards many conflicts and failures.

This is exactly what led me to say that when holy men have founded religions, it is their sectarianism that we so readily accept, not religion. God has willed that religion be acquired through personal and independent effort, not as a favour from another. Truth cannot be received through supplication....

How, then, shall we understand religious sects or communities? These must be seen as not the water that satiates our thirst but as the vessel that holds the water. He who is genuinely thirsty, desperately seeks water everywhere and when the opportunity presents itself, drinks what little he can, if need be even by holding the water in his cupped palms. He who is not thirsty holds the water vessel to be more precious. It is then that rather than seek

water to drink, men start quarrelling over the possession of the water vessel....

Men who have founded religious traditions have left behind earthen water pots or even pots made of gold, depending upon their personal capacities. All the same, it would be an error to believe that constructing that pot was the true measure of their greatness. This is because while that pot would be precious and useful to us, it cannot be so for people across the world. No matter how blinded we are by devotional fervour or given to vanity on account of our belonging to some religious community, we can never lose sight of that fact.... We really cannot visualize such a universalistic religion whose ideas or rites would meet the requirements of all.

Hence, to understand the religious leaders of this world from the perspective of religious canon or prescriptive rites would only amount to belittling them. That is a perspective that only the followers of a sect can adopt which, unfortunately, leads to only greater conflict between sects. There would have to be something in their life and teachings which is capable of attracting all people at all places; this would be comparable to the light produced by the lamp, not the lamp itself.

What quality might that be? That which our religious leaders have inherited, not that which they have themselves created....

It is my earnest prayer that the person in whose memory we have all assembled here not be identified with any particular religious group or community. I always fear the possibility of sectarians raising the banner of sectarianism so high as to dwarf the founder of the sect itself....

We have been acquainted with many facets of his (Maharshi Debendranath Tagore's) character. He has especially revealed himself to us in his language, everyday behaviour, and work ... but is there nothing else that his life and work reveals to us other than these personal qualities? Does the light exist in order that it

may reveal the lamp or does the lamp exist so that it could spread the light? Today, if instead of fully viewing God whom he has seen or wants to reveal to us, we remain caught up in some special personal quality of his, we would be underplaying his importance as a holy man.

The Maharshi, even within a life of plenty, could see the hollowness within. We all know, how, in order to quench his spiritual thirst, he set off on a most difficult road. He did not fail to reach the spot from where emanates all Bliss that sustains this world. And having visited that holy spot, he remembered to fetch us a pot full of water. That pot might break one day and the religious community that he established might not survive in its present form. However, the fact that he was able to fulfil his life at the spring of immortality has been the most enduring gain for posterity. This will never be lost to us.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that we will never obtain God through someone else's grace. We must undertake our personal journeys to meet Him face to face and realize all there is on the strength of our individual efforts. It should not worry us if the journey proves to be difficult and our progress slow. It often happens that having heard a few sermons delivered to us or else by adhering to socially prescribed customs, we fall back on a sense of complacency. We then tend to believe that we have fully realized our spiritual selves. But even that feeling, it would be important to remember, is at best the water put into a pot, not the source of water itself. Such water may turn foul or dry-up one day and thus fail to sustain us in spiritual life. We must all travel to that perennial source of water and fully realize our intimate relationship with God.... It is only when we respond to his call and fully surrender ourselves before Him that we truly realize ourselves (as did the Maharshi).

It is this valuable lesson that we may gather from the lives of holy men.... It is here that we also glean the Truth that binds the

human soul to the Divine. Such knowledge is gainfully ours.... In examining the lives of holy men we first ought to understand the reasons that compelled them to renounce and, thereafter, the spiritual gains that they made which justify the renunciation. That our own minds have now awakened to such questions represents the spiritual progress that we have made. Without this awakening, no such gain could have been made....

Do we perceive such matters in the life of the Maharshi? On closely studying his life we find that he ventured out empty-handed, having given up all past habits and conventions. Existing social customs could not hold him captive, the scriptures could not extend to him their support. It was his own spiritual anguish that led him to his spiritual path. That path was born out of the innate nature of his soul.... He had to discover that path himself, having cast aside all other paths. And had it not been for the fact that he was determined to secure his goal, he too would have failed to exhibit the patience and courage that was required for such a momentous discovery. While travelling on that path he had to put up with much suffering and social abuse but that did not deter him.... God too wants it this way. Even though He is the Lord of the Universe, it is His wish that He relate to us only individually. It is, therefore, that He has helped us to build an impregnable individuality that can withstand attacks from all quarters.... It is within this pure and pristine solitude that He has determined the spot where the two of us will meet....

3.

HARMONY*

Regardless of whether or not we know of any other truth, there is one truth deeply embedded in our hearts which is that only in love are all conflicts and contestations resolved and harmonized. Differences in the realm of knowledge lead to heated arguments; in the realm of everyday activity, opposing forces keep fighting one another without yielding any ground. It is only in love that all conflicts are amicably resolved....

In the matter of philosophical disputation, dualism and non-dualism are strongly opposed to each other ... but within the

domain of love both these positions come to occupy the same place. In love it becomes important to reveal our differences but also to overcome them. We can neither overlook such differences, nor remain perennially absorbed in them. Only with love is it possible to bring about this out-of-the world experience whereby those, which, by their very nature were contradictory, lose all contradictions.

Since God manifests love He has split one into two and then joined them back again as one. It is clear to me that the 'two' is as real as the 'one'. This extraordinary matter cannot be explained through rational argument; this ought to be left to love.

It is, therefore, that in the Upanishads we find descriptions of God that are contrary to one another:

Ya ekohavarna bahudhasaktiyogat barnanekonnihitartho dadhati

* *Source*: 'Samanjasya' (Harmony), address delivered in Aghrayan 1315 BS/November–December 1908. Later included in *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 535–7.

> He is one and does not belong to any class (varna) and yet, without belonging to any particular specie (jati), He caters to the deep-seated yearnings of many classes.[1]

How is it that He who is one also meets the requirements of many? This is possible since He manifests love. Hence He cannot remain content in Himself but has to reach out to many....

In an infinite number of nations He extends His presence. It is He who also creates dispensations and keeps working at these. He is both static and constantly in movement.

Within our nature too there is a particular place where we notice this harmony of the static and the mobile. That happens to be the domain of love. The rest we are able to merely touch in passing; we are forced to give these up almost immediately after we take hold of them. Our mind finds stability when we find love, and yet this is precisely where we are also most active. It is here that our minds are constantly in movement. It is love that provided both rest and restlessness. It is only in love that mobility and immobility assume the same name.

In the domain of everyday activity, renunciation and possession are classed differently; indeed, they reveal quite contrary qualities. In love, however, renunciation is virtually the same as worldly gain. That which I gift to the one whom I love is in fact my gain. In the accounting book of joy, receipts and expenditure are entered in the same column. There, giving is the same as receiving. In this wonderful creation of His, where God has set in motion the play of love, He has, in fact, gained by giving up Himself to us. This act of joining give and take is called love.

In philosophy, there is a major argument about whether or not God is a Being (*purusha*), about whether or not He is endowed with qualities, or whether He may be called a personal God or the impersonal. In love, the two possible answers, the 'yes' and the 'no', are inseparable. In love, one particular aspect of God possesses qualities, the other does not. On the one side, there is

[1] *Swetaswatar Upanishad*, IV:1.

the insistence on 'I', on the other, its denial. On the one hand, love acquires self-awareness, on the other, this has to be completely abandoned. Hence, the debate on whether or not God has qualities is mere debate; it does not affect God in any way.

Religious discourse in the West maintains that there is, potentially, infinite progress that man is capable of making in approaching God. Man is taken to be constantly travelling in His direction but never does he succeed in meeting Him. Our Upanishads, however, maintain that both eventualities are possible. We cannot ever draw close enough to Him but it is also entirely possible that we do. We never gain Him but we also do:

> *yato vache nivartante aprapya manasa swaha anandam Brahmano vidwan na vibheti kutaschana (kadachana)*[2]
>
> There is no other known instance of such mutually contradictory ideas to have been so clearly expressed in consecutive verses.
>
> It is clearly stated how not just verbal articulation but the mind itself returns once it fails to find Him. And yet, he who has known the joy of Brahman has no cause to fear anything. What is it that is known this way? This is the acknowledgement of joy, of love. This is 'knowing' that goes beyond all other forms of knowing. It is only within love that there is no internal contradiction between knowing and not knowing. A wife may not fully know her husband through ordinary cognitive qualities but in the language of love and joy she knows him in a way that even the most knowledgeable do not. This is the mystery embedded in love. On the one side, we know nothing; on the other, we know all. It is in love that the Infinite surrenders to the finite and the finite embraces the Infinite; this is a matter that cannot be settled through mere argument.

In our religious texts we find liberation and worldliness to be poles apart, with neither caring much for the other. On the one hand, we are advised to end all our worldly ties so that we may

[2] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, II:4:1.

attain liberation. Freedom is now taken to be a most valuable commodity and this is an idea that our knowledge of the Western discourse has only deepened in us. All the same, we cannot forget that there remains a domain where freedom and submissiveness are held equally valuable. That is the domain of love. There the subordinated does not bow down even an inch before one who is free. Love alone is fully free and submissive at the same time.

God is not merely free or liberated. If that were not so, He would have been rendered completely inactive. Quite to the contrary, He has imposed limits on Himself. If he has not done so, there would have been no creation and in creation we would have found no order or meaning. It is God's joyous form, the form in which He reveals Himself, that represents the limits that He has placed upon Himself. It is in this joyous form that He appears so close to us, so pleasing to us. The limits He puts on Himself represent the bonds of love between God and us. It is thus that He becomes our companion, our father....

Which is the more profound truth? Is it that which says that God is pure, enlightened, free? Or that which reveals His ties with us? Actually, both these are equally profound. By looking upon submissiveness as something inferior, we have developed wrong notions about this. There are other such erroneous notions that we also hold. For instance, we take the small to be insignificant and the large to be grand, as though greatness could be mathematically measured! Similarly, we tend to abuse that which is finite in nature. But do we really know the finite? The finite represents a most astonishing mystery. It is in fact the finite that reveals the Infinite....

We merely play with words when speaking of freedom and servility. We forget that both are actually seated on the same throne. It is not as though we covet freedom alone; it is also the desire to surrender ourselves and serve that which is coveted. The desire in which the two are happily reconciled is the desire of love. The first task before love is to first acknowledge its ties and obligations and then to transcend them....

Vaishnavism has revealed to us the true worth of submissiveness. It is with extraordinary courage that Vaishnavs have suggested that God has willingly tied Himself to His creation. It is on this glorious tie, they tell us, that the very existence of all living forms rest. It is a matter of great happiness for us that God could not keep Himself apart. He has willingly acknowledged His ties with us. How else would we have existed? Throughout this world He serves us as a mother serves her child or a woman her lover. It is by accepting this role of a servant that He has truly glorified the act of service. If He had only so desired, He might have celebrated this creation of His with great pomp and splendour. Instead, why does he try to attach Himself to us? … He is constantly reminding us 'I have given you my joy; it is time that you return it.'…

4.

IN THE ETERNAL COMPANY OF BRAHMAN*

One must attain Brahman, we are told. But what does 'attainment' mean? In our everyday lives, we continue to obtain several

* *Source*: 'Akhanda Pawa' (Realizing the One and Indivisible), sermon delivered on 17 Chaitra 1315 BS/March 1909. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan* (1909–16); reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 658–9.

things on a regular basis. We also try to ensure that we obtain such things in the matter that best suits us. When that does not happen, we somehow feel cheated. A similar statement may be made in relation to our quest for God. I may be persuaded to believe that in my list of personal possessions that includes a horse, a carriage, and household utensils, God too must be included somewhere. However, we need to look at this matter closely. What is the true nature of man's yearning for God? Is it simply to add another important item to my list of possessions? That can never be the case. In our worldly lives, our acts of acquisition and accumulation have already got us into enough trouble. Is it not to escape the sheer drudgery of it all that we think of God? ...

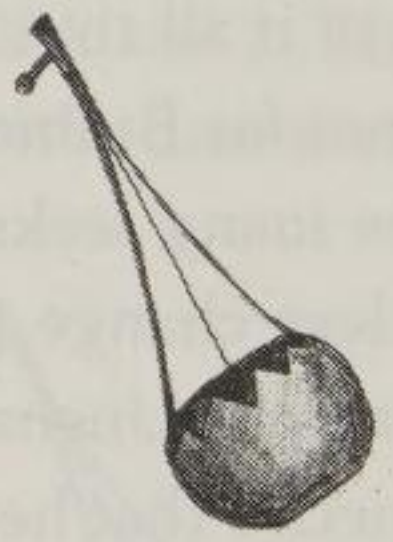
That the human soul pines for Brahman essentially means that he who is oppressed by the many seeks comfort in One, he who is disturbed by the relentless change that goes on around him seeks that which is Eternal and Unchanging. Actually, it is not something unique or distinctive that he seeks....

Hence the advice offered to us is: *Isvasyamidam sarvam yatkincha jagatyam jagat* (Know that all that there is in this world is permeated by God's Presence). We are not to look for something other than this, nor imagine one. It is only thus that the human soul will find its true resting place, its contentment. This is how one must perceive Him in this Universe. But then, what will one enjoy? *Tyen tyakten bhunjitha* (Enjoy only that which He has given away to us), and further, *Ma gridha kasyaswiddhanam* (Do not covet property belonging to others).[1]

This suggests that just as it is important to perceive how Brahman has lavishly endowed this world, it is equally important that one realizes that that which he possesses comes as a gift from Brahman. But is that enough? No, your desires must be fulfilled with what you possess. Our prayers should not be to ask for more for this may have no end. Rather, one should rest content with the

[1] All citations in this passage are from the opening verse of the *Isha Upanishad.*

thought that whatever he possesses was only God's loving gift to him. It was upon realizing this that the few will turn into many and the Infinite will become manifest in the finite. This world, broken up into countless fragments, derives its very meaning from that which is Indivisible; the numerous object of our sensual pleasure also emanate from His act of giving. Once that is known it becomes unnecessary to look for God at some particular place or in some special image. Thereby, we also cease to hold some special attraction for any worldly object that we think can satisfy our unceasing desire....



5.

THE OMNIPRESENT GOD*

When his followers asked the Buddha about the mysteries of creation and the destiny of man, he said:

> Why must you go into such questions? For the time being, just focus on that which is most important for you. I can see that you are

* *Source*: 'Bhuma' (The Great, the Absolute), sermon delivered on 14 Chaitra 1315 BS/March–April 1909. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 653–4.

in a state of great unhappiness. You do not get what you seek, nor are you able to hold on to what comes your way or be happy with what you possess. Before all else, you must learn to overcome this unhappiness.

Having said that, he identified the conquest of suffering (dukkha) as the highest objective in human life and beckoned us all to the road to liberation.

All the same, man cannot accept the conquest of unhappiness as the prime objective in his life. That is simply not in his nature. I can see that he does not always decline to accept suffering in his life; on the contrary, at times he willingly endures it. It is quite unnecessary for a man to take the vow of scaling a particularly daunting peak in the Alps mountain range, and yet he is prepared to take the vow, notwithstanding the hardship or suffering that this may cause him. There can be many similar other instances. What is the reason for this? This is because man dares to accept a challenge; he is keen to constantly remind himself and others that he has the power to withstand suffering.

In truth, the greatest desire in man is to be successful, to be counted among the great, not merely made happy. Alexander[1] was suddenly seized with the idea of becoming a world conqueror, leading his army across inaccessible rivers, mountains, deserts, and oceans. What drove him to put up with such hardship, giving up the comforts of a ruler ruling over his kingdom? This was born not of some greed for empires but the ambition to attain greatness. It is through this ambition that he also more fully experienced his own strength. When a man has such intentions in mind, he is not held back by any thoughts of suffering or pain.

[1] The invincible military commander (*356–323* BCE) who came to rule over one of the largest empires in the ancient world. He was crowned king of Macedon in *336* BCE. He invaded north-western parts of India in *326* BCE.

The man who keeps hoarding money day and night, forfeiting bodily comfort or sleep is perpetually troubled by the ambition of turning a millionaire. Again, on what account has he endured such suffering? To attain greatness based on the wealth he possesses. It would be pointless to advise him in the following words: 'Do not trouble yourself any further, allow me teach you the path to overcome this suffering.' Equally useless is the advice to him to take his mind away from money and to begin enjoying the world. Which man is more prepared to endure suffering than he?

Now what is the most attractive quality about the teachings of the Buddha? It is that a man must prepare to endure greater suffering as he advances on the road that leads to the end of this suffering. By posing challenges before himself, a man seeks to experience his own greatness. The challenge looks attractive because it brings out his strength or power in greater measure.... Hence, when a man is asked to free himself from suffering by renouncing his desires that bring on such suffering, he may well react by stating that he did not wish to be freed of his suffering! His contentment will come only upon achieving a measure of greatness.

The Upanishads say: *bhumaiva sukham*[2]—happiness simply as happiness does not please us; we are truly happy only when this happiness is induced by a sense of Greatness. *Bhumateveva vijigyasitavyah*—it is this Greatness that we must know; it is the Great that we must seek. One who truly understands the import of this statement will never say, 'I do not seek the Great.' Whether in respect of wealth, learning, or fame, we are prepared to endure suffering only to achieve personal greatness. Sadly, this greatness that we ordinarily seek is not something that will make a soul feel that it has attained all.

[2] '*Bhuma tat sukham*', *Chandogya Upanishad*, VII:23:1

Hence, only if we were to place before man He who is Brahman, He who is Great, He who is greater than all, it may just happen that he takes Brahman to be his goal, not the conquest of suffering. Some of us might argue that setting Brahman as man's highest objective in life does not practically help very much. It would seem that as a human quest, this is too far removed for man to start worrying at once. First, he would be expected to give up all his worldly desires and gain spiritual strength and purity. After all, Brahman is seen to lie at the end of a long spiritual journey (sadhana).

I would suggest, however, that we familiarize ourselves with Brahman right at the beginning of our spiritual journey so that the road itself becomes an objective and our purity, an end in itself.... By studying grammar all the time, a man becomes a grammarian; he fails to enter the vast world of literature for which knowledge of grammar is only an aid....

To Him whom we seek in our spiritual life, we must prepare to fully surrender ourselves. He will then lead us unto Himself, holding us by our hands. When that happens, the journey itself as also the destination will give us great happiness. This will also prove to us that our experiences are not polarized: interest cannot be born in total apathy, honesty from utter dishonesty, possession from a state of total non-possession. He, who shall reveal Himself to us as Pure Bliss will also guide us through His kindliness....

6.
BECOMING*

... To obtain something is to obtain it only partially. That which we need as a matter of necessity, we obtain only to the extent required, not more. Our relation with material things like food, clothes, or housing are determined by our practical needs and in such matters, we rarely cross limits.

The fulfilment of such needs we understand as 'obtaining' something. When it comes to God too, sheer habit makes us think of 'obtaining' him in the same way. We think we have 'obtained' him at some particular time and place; we think that we have located him in some image, a temple, or even in our imagination. However, if this we understand as 'obtaining' something, then it would have to be said that God Himself cannot be so obtained. That which we think we have gained is not God. He lies beyond such possibilities; He cannot be counted among our material needs or possessions.

Thus, there is the possibility of becoming, not obtaining or gaining God. We shall never obtain Him; rather, we may realize our very being within Him. With all my body, mind, and heart I may only strive towards becoming. As I said earlier, obtaining something is only partial; becoming, on the other hand, is fulsome and complete. It represents not some gain for me but my own self-development. The coward will say, 'What! You aspire to become Brahman! How dare you even utter such words!'

* *Source*: 'Howa' (Becoming), sermon delivered on 3 Baisakh 1316 BS/April 1909. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 680–1.

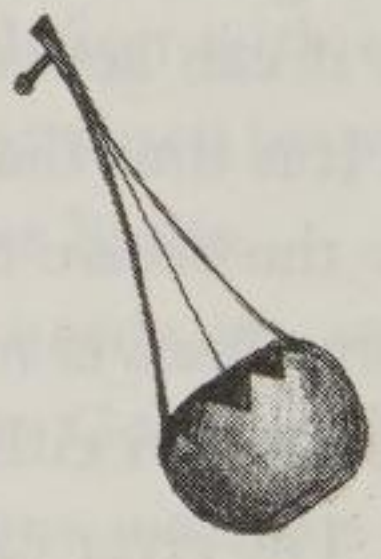
Yes, I dare say I shall become Brahman[1] and, but for this, there is nothing else that I can utter. It is without the slightest hesitation that I say that I shall be Brahman. On the other hand, I dare not suggest that I shall 'obtain' Him. Does this suggest that there is nothing separating Brahman and myself? Yes, there certainly is and the separation is indeed wide. He is already Brahman and I shall progressively have to be one. This is the Divine Play that is at work between the two of us. It is through our union that Divine Bliss will be generated.

The river keeps expressing the desire to become an ocean but this is not something that it can actively become. For the river, the ocean is but its destiny. It is thus that the river, on meeting the ocean continues to become the ocean: the act of becoming seems to know no end. Ultimately, there is nothing else that the river can become but for the ocean. On either of its banks are fields, cities, villages, and woods. The river can feed them, please them, but not unite with them. With whatever lies on its banks, it has only a temporary relationship. No matter how hard it tries, the river can never become cities, villages, or forests. It can become only the ocean....

But note that the river can only become the ocean, it cannot obtain it. The river cannot take away the ocean and conceal it in some deep hole or cavern with some special purpose in mind. If, in the manner of a fool, it boasted that it had the ocean in its possession, I would have to say that while it did indeed come to possess the ocean, the ocean in its possession was not the ocean of its seeking. If it was the ocean that the river sought, if it truly wanted to become the ocean, then it would not want to possess it.

[1] A Sanskrit term commonly found in the Upanishads indicating a metaphysical principle. Brahman is generally taken to signify the essence of the world from which everything originates. There are, however, significant variations in the ways in which the term is understood in Hindu philosophy.

We may become only Brahman and none else. In this alone we derive fulfilment. We can overtake everything else but the Brahman. Here the small becomes big and its delight lies in the fact that it never ceases to grow. We shall seek only the Bliss of Brahman. Upon approaching Brahman, we shall progressively become Brahman. Wherever there be any obstacles on our path, we shall either destroy it or else ignore it. Whenever our vanity, selfishness, and ignorance appear as mountainous heaps of sand and block our progress, we shall continue destroying them....



7.
GIVING GOD HIS DUE*

I suspect that man always tries to draw up some fancy connection with God. He is not prepared to alter his life and social environment in any way and yet hopes to keep God by his side. This arrangement looks all too easy and has the advantage of not disturbing anything. I say to God,

* *Source*: 'Maran' (Death), sermon delivered on 19 Falgun 1315 BS/ February–March 1909. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 628–31.

You are welcome to step into my house but please do be careful with everything that lies in your path; please see to it that my glass flower vase does not fall from its place or that none of the fancy dolls that I have planted at various places to decorate my home are damaged in any way. You are welcome but try not to sit on that seat; that is usually reserved for so and so. Do walk around but avoid that particular place where I regularly perform a particular work. You are free to enter any of my rooms barring those that I have set aside for X.

In this manner, we assign to God the least coveted or useless of places.

I recall having once heard a story narrated from one of my father's servants. The man told me how, upon reaching Puri, he was placed in a quandary. Now it is a convention at Puri that whatever a man ritually offered to Lord Jagannath,[1] he could thereafter never consume himself. This proved to be quite troubling for the man: whatever came to his mind to offer he hesitated to offer since he knew he could not savour the same again. The trouble was that the man liked most of these things and the very thought of giving them up for good caused him great anguish. At last, after spending a lot of time thinking, he came upon the idea of offering the Lord a tomato! That was the vegetable that he liked the least!

We too are prepared to leave for God only that which attracts us the least. We carelessly chant a few mantras in the name of the Lord; we hear a few devotional songs being rendered, attend religious discourses delivered by competent speakers, and having done all that, we begin to feel gratified. We feel as though having pleased God through such acts, our minds have turned holy and pure.... It is to be noted though that when we pray for greater knowledge, wealth, or seek favours from fellow men, things don't look so easy. It is in praying to God that we can afford to be relaxed and sincere.

[1] Literally, the Lord of the Universe and the presiding deity at the Hindu pilgrim site of Puri. There is now scholarly consensus on the view that the Jagannath cult has tribal and Buddhist origins.

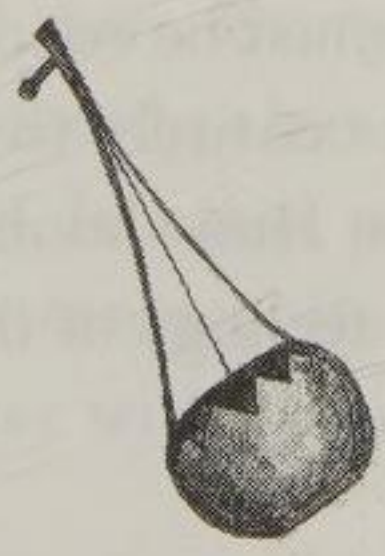
In this country there is a saying to the effect that genuine cleverness lies in pleasing both parties in a dispute. However, even those who are able to achieve this cannot sustain it for a long time. They begin to neglect one side or another and their cleverness begins to desert them.... Actually, we truly please both sides only when we surrender all before God. It is in Him that both the sides are united. If I was to discover myself in Him, then I would discover both Him and myself. On the contrary, if I was to clearly define our respective spheres of power or influence, this would reflect only our petty, materialist minds and modes of thinking. The latter does not endure....

It is only when we begin to approach God that we begin to understand the overwhelming power of worldly attractions that we have built up all around us. Such is this power that when united with Him I have not the faintest feeling of being united. Our habits and conventions keep us on a tight leash; in practical life these are very difficult to give up. If, somehow, we succeed in giving up one of these, others soon make their appearance.

All this time, taking worldly life to be my last refuge, I have gathered many things around me. Over time, such assets have grown countless roots and branches of which even I happen to know very little. Whenever trying to displace any of these, I wonder how my life could continue without them. Even though I realize that these are not objects on which I can stake my life, the sheer force of habit makes me take them to be an indispensable part of my existence. It has become a settled habit in me to count wealth as an asset but how shall I truly measure what this wealth is worth? Over a long time, my sundry possessions have turned this wealth into a mountainous pile that is extremely heavy. Trying to move that pile even an inch causes pain in my chest. It is thus that Jesus had said that salvation for the rich is extremely difficult. Here, wealth does not simply mean money; it is all that one has greedily accumulated over time, calls it his possession, and keeps clinging to it perpetually. Such accumulation may comprise money, personal fame, or even religious virtue (punya).

In truth, the accumulation of punya[2] is no less deceptive. It pretends as though it transmits to God all the good that has been acquired. We are also falsely drawn to the belief that since we help other men, practice renunciation, and willingly undergo suffering, punya keeps accumulating in us. Whereas all my enthusiasm, inspiration, and work are taken from God; little do I realize that a good part of this I keep appropriating for myself all the time. Take for instance our ashram school. Since I know running a school is noble work, I stop being careful with what I am doing. Little do I realize that even in publicly running the school, I put away something that is entirely my own. I realize that this is our school and that its success speaks for our own success, and for this reason I join the interests of the school with that of my own. Over time, the little things that I keep appropriating for myself begin to take the shape of an asset. To protect the school, I am prepared to pick up a quarrel and I am even prepared to arrange for false witness who might defend me and the school from crit-
ics. I become especially sensitive about the image that the school carries in public. With me, all this is now a habit, an infatuation, the very nourishment that I must survive on. I turn anxious at the very thought of God ever trying to deprive me of this asset....

He who is in the habit of accumulating is only creating trouble for himself. He becomes the victim of a self-perpetuating habit and is no longer able to feel the presence of God around him....



[2] Religious virtue or merit which may accrue from performing ethically or religiously prescribed acts.

8.

SELF-SURRENDER*

It is worth recapitulating that we cannot really speak of attaining Brahman since He has already fully given Himself up to us. It cannot be said, therefore, that some part of Him has not been revealed to us for which we must keep looking.

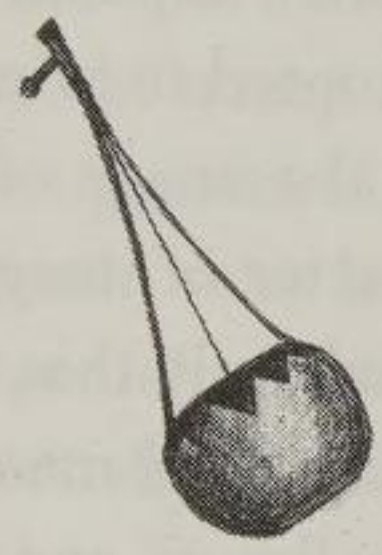
Rather than speak of attaining Brahman, we must prepare to give ourselves up to Him. If there is at all something missing, it is this. He has given Himself up to us but we have not returned that gesture. Hence our failing to unite with Him. We have kept ourselves aloof and under the malign influence of self-interest and pettiness.

It is for this reason that the Buddha's advice to us was to increasingly free ourselves of our ego. But there is a problem here. If there is nothing greater to covet than our ego, why must we at all sink our ego? If, as the Buddhists say, the world is void, our personal ego, our distinctiveness, is something that we must retain, not give up....

The worship of Brahman cannot be a worship directed at obtaining Him. Instead it must be concerned with returning His gift; to surrender ourselves entirely to His care. To increasingly extend our presence within Him should be our worship and this we may carry on through feelings of devotion, forgiveness, self-contentment, and service....

* *Source*: 'Atmasmarpan' (Self-surrender), sermon delivered on 18 Chaitra 1315 BS/April 1909. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 659–60. The concluding verses are in my translation and the original version now included in the *Gitabitan* (Puja), Song #181.

Not all that I possess I have made over to you my Lord!
my shame, my fear, my pride, and my humiliation,
happy and unhappy thoughts;
separating us are numerous veils of all kinds,
it is thus that I wander about, crying,
not having found you,
the pain in my heart remains the way it was.



9.

WORLD CONSCIOUSNESS*

Every civilization uses its cumulative experiences to construct its conception of an ideal man. Every part of a tree ranging from the roots to the branches has but one objective: to have its fruits bear the finest seeds. In other words, it tries to concentrate in the seeds its quintessence, its optimum strength, and quality. The same is the case with human society: the ideal man

* *Source*: 'Viswabodh' (World Consciousness), address delivered at Calcutta on the occasion of the annual Maghotsava celebrations of 1316 BS/January–February 1910. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 7, pp. 721–8.

is expected to represent the highest manifestation of human powers and potentiality.

The clarity with which the ideal man is conceptualized varies from community to community and in keeping with its special characteristics. Some may take bodily strength to be the defining quality of human excellence; others may take intelligence and yet others moral character, and it is with the objective of procuring these that they employ all their capabilities and power. There was a time when India too attempted to bring out the best in man. We saw reflected in ourselves the image of the ideal man. But could this have been purely a matter of imagination? In truth, we can establish as our mental ideal, only that which we find around us.

Who did India take for its ideal man out of a host of talented, knowledgeable, and valiant kings and emperors? ... They happened to be the sages. Who were these sages? They were men whose minds were fully satiated upon perceiving the Great Soul (paramatman)[1] through Knowledge; comforted to find It located in their souls, dispassionate upon experiencing it in their heart, and at peace with themselves once they found It revealed in everyday life and activity. These were sages who were delighted to find the paramatman manifest everywhere, joined to all souls and located in every single being.

✳ The spiritual discipline of India focused on following the wisdom of these sages. These men were neither rich, nor powerful, nor given to material pleasure. They were forever calm and composed and their souls perpetually yoked to the Great Soul. From this it may be concluded that to attach oneself to everybody else through the paramatman is what India looked upon as the prime objective in human life. It found no glory in attempting to acquire greater wealth or power or to make oneself extraordinary in any respect.

Man may destroy, forcibly take away, acquire, or discover new things but these are not qualities that make him great. Human

[1] Literally, the Great Soul; equated with God.

intelligence cannot reach out to all places, his powers cannot perform everything; it is only his soul that is unbounded and knows no limits. The greatest of men have declared on the strength of their extraordinary powers that irrespective of whether there are big men or small, located in high places or low, an enemy or a friend, all people around us are members of the same family. The best of men place themselves in close proximity to fellow men which aids in the soul's establishing contact with the Omnipresent Soul. Whenever a man attempts to push out others so as to proclaim his own greatness, he loses this contact. It is only the former class of men who have truly known the worth of human life and the Upanishads have called them *yuktatma* or those whose souls are eternally joined to the Divine....

Such a line of thought is hinted at in the preaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus has said that it is as difficult for the rich man to attain salvation as it is for a camel to pass through the eyes of a needle.[2] This suggests that wealth or fame or whatever else we acquire to make us appear singular or important only obliterates our links with the Divine. By trying to secure these exclusively for ourselves, we only keep others at some distance. The more we accumulate, the greater pride we take in ourselves, and such pride seems to know no bounds. The more disconnected a man becomes with others, the more he keeps losing his right of entry to other places.... In our country, it has been said that in attaining God a man must feel one with all others. It is not by detaching ourselves or else giving up everything that we attain Him.

Some modern European philosophers, even when directly or indirectly influenced by the Upanishads, claim that the Brahman of the Upanishads is a wholly Abstract Being. They take the Upanishads to preach the idea of attaining the Infinite only through renunciation. For them, Brahman exists only in philosophical discourse. I do not wish to discuss at any length whether or not such a discourse exists in India too. Suffice to say that

[2] Mathew: 19:24.

this is not what India truly believed. In this country, attempts to experience the Infinite in this world and in worldly substances had advanced to the point where philosophers of other countries had not the courage to go.

Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkincha jagatyam jagat[3]

Whatever there is in this world know it to be permeated by God.

This was the spiritual advice given to us.... God is present equally in fire and water and for Him there is no opposition between the two. He is equally present in seasonal crops that appear for only a few months as also in those gigantic trees, which, as symbols of immortality, have provided this earth with fruit and shade for thousands of years. It is not enough to acknowledge God's presence everywhere; we must salute Him....

It emerges therefore that if we wish to obtain the totality of Experience, then our discrete and disparate experiences must be joined to one another. In truth, as man develops, his experiences continue to expand. Man's poetry, philosophy, science, arts, religion all come together to make his experience progressively larger. It is by drawing closer to other men that a man grows, not by asserting individual greatness. The more he draws closer to people the less will be his desire to assert himself. Man extends his rights not by appropriating greater space for himself, not even by his outward behaviour. The Truth of Man extends only to the point of his experiences and it is only up to that point that he can assert his rights.

It is on this quest for acquiring a Universal Consciousness, of extending one's experience to unite with all, that India has placed the greatest emphasis. It is through the chanting of the Gayatri Mantra[4] that India has daily meditated on this feeling, experience,

[3] Opening verse of *Isha Upanishad.*

[4] Verses occurring in *Rig Veda*, III.62.10. The Gayatri Mantra, as Bankimchandra noted in the 1880s, was originally an invocation to the sun but subsequently taken to represent the adoration of Supreme God.

and consciousness. It is to awaken man's inner consciousness that the Upanishads advise locating all life in the soul and the soul in every life form and to give up all feelings of rancour and hatred. The Buddha attempted to fully develop this consciousness by adopting a path through which the human mind expanded from non-violence to compassion, and from compassion to a sense of Universal Brotherhood.

In order that we truly attain this consciousness and experience all, there is a price that we have to pay. What is this price that we are required to pay? It is to give up ourselves. It is in surrendering ourselves that we obtain all.... This is indicated in the Upanishads: *'tyakten bhunjita'*—gain by renouncing desire. The Gita too says 'Carry out work selflessly without coveting the fruits thereof'. From such teachings many are led to conclude that India propagates only passive doctrines since it takes the world to be false and an illusion. The truth, however, is quite to the contrary.

The man who exults in himself belittles others. The mind that harbours desire remains trapped in that desire, indifferent to everything else, perhaps even carrying a tinge of cruelty. This occurs because he alone wishes to dominate who assumes himself to be superior to others. A man holds on to that desire alone which he knows to be true; for him, the rest is an illusion. Such men truly deserve to be called *mayavadis*, believers in the doctrine of Maya.[5] A man takes his first step towards civilization when he ceases to view himself in isolation. Rather, he begins to see himself as related to many: to his parents, brothers, or friends. This is when he starts growing. What is the price he pays for this? He curbs his natural temperament, desires, and vanity. But for this he can never truly realize himself within his own family. It is only

[5] A Hindu metaphysical principle of critical importance to non-dualist philosophers of the school of Acharya Sankara. In Vedantic non-dualism, Maya is taken to represent 'illusion' or 'appearance' but equated with Sakti/Goddess in more theistic schools within Vedanta.

when a man surrenders himself to all others in the family that he becomes a true householder.

To remain a householder, sociable or patriotic, a man has to consistently discipline himself.... As he progresses from the domain of the family to the larger domain of society and from society to the still larger domain of the country, he also keeps shedding his ego and turns dispassionate.... Man is continuously trying to broaden his field of existence; this is the very sign of humanity. Today we find that in the West such desires have assumed the quality of an imperious will. There has arisen a strong movement to unite the people of one racial stock, spread over many countries, into one united Grand Empire. To strengthen such feelings among the common people, many kinds of institutions and festivities are being organized. In their schools, theatres, in songs, poetry, novels, geography, and history, such efforts are continuously coming to the fore.

Just as Europe today considers the founding of national empires to produce general good, India had once tried to arouse the universal consciousness in man, knowing it to be the greatest and noblest human objective.... We, who have inherited this great mission, must be careful not to trivialize this in any way by citing the example of other countries. India alone has been entrusted with the task of making Truth more luminous. The day has arrived when we must strive to make this mission of ours a success. We shall happily take it upon ourselves the task of welcoming big and small; our endeavour shall be to unite caste to caste, religion to religion, society to society. We shall seek to suppress feelings of jealousy or hatred, domination of one over another and to diminish differences between this country and others. In India, the difference between man and man, whether in thought or deed, the cruelty, neglect, and hatred that comes through in daily behaviour of men in relation to fellow men has no parallels elsewhere in the world. It is for this reason that we are losing Him who resides in the entire mankind. His revelation has variety but these are not mutually opposed forces. To lose

Him amounts to losing goodness, harmony, and Truth. It is thus that we suffer such misery....

Today we shall have to reiterate through history the answer to the biggest human problem that had once been offered by India. Presently, there are many races and peoples in this country, many contrary forces that have arrived from various directions, and differences between them have only further intensified. The time has come when we must employ all that is in our power to uphold the wisdom that was once ours. Until this is done, we shall remain vulnerable to repeated assaults from the world outside and to humiliation and failure. God will not allow us to rest in peace even for a single day. Our aim is to remove all differences between man and man and to perceive the underlying unity of all mankind. This does not bring greater commercial success for us or make our people somehow more powerful. The only reason for doing this is to ensure that our soul remains a part of that Truth that is God....

O Lord! Awaken in me the Truth that surrendering before you ought to be my most fervent prayer. Take away everything that I have, take away all that surrounds me. Only then can I become everything that You are. However, in this human life, I shall never be able to summon enough courage to offer this prayer until I also inwardly realize the following:

Raso vai swaha, rasam hyabeyam labdhanandi bhavati.[6]

The Lord is the Supreme Aesthetic Substance (rasa); all happiness or contentment that we may derive only follows from realizing this rasa....[7]

[6] *Taitteriya Upanishad*, II:7:2.

[7] Aesthetic feeling or sensibility.

10.
THE LIFE OF CHRIST*

Once I asked a man belonging to the community of Bauls, 'Don't you accept food from all?' 'No', he replied. On my asking the reason thereof, he said, 'We do not accept food from those who do not accept us as a religious community.' 'But even if others do not accept you, what prevents you from accepting them?' I shot back. The man paused for a while and then quite innocently replied, 'What you say is true. I think we have deliberately played some mischief there.'

In our society, rules of social and ritual differentiation have led

us to partition this world into disparate blocks. There are those with whom we are willing to fraternize and those with whom we are not. Unfortunately, we have even extended such segregation to great men who truly belong to this whole world. We have shown some hostility towards a man as holy as Jesus Christ and remain reluctant to accept him as a religious teacher with all our mind and heart. However, the responsibility for this cannot rest with us entirely. At most times, we have known of Jesus only through Christian missionaries who have revealed to us the Christ shrouded in Christian dogma. Hitherto, such men have also consistently tried to use their own religious ideas or values to attack ours. Not surprisingly, our reaction to all this has been to hit back in self-defence....

* *Source*: Address delivered at Santiniketan on Christmas day, 1910. Originally called 'Jishucharit' (The Life of Christ) and included in the collection *Christo*; reproduced in RR, vol. 14, pp. 333–41.

It is now commonplace that at the time when modern English education was first introduced into India, our society was deeply crisis-ridden. Indian society then was in turmoil and the educated mind was strongly agitated by the onrushing tides of cultural criticism. At the time, we were given to understand that methods of worship traditionally known to India were no more than child's play and that we, as a people, lacked any higher conceptions of God or religion. Such statements naturally made us quite shamefaced. It was also when the boundaries of Hinduism were collapsing that Hindus turned their back on their own country and culture and began disrespecting their own religion. This only further weakened us in the face of external attacks. The nightmarish effects of all this we have still not fully overcome.

On the whole though, the crisis is now over. At the time when our society was deeply troubled, there arrived great men like Rammohun Roy[1] who swept away the rubbish from under our feet and restored to our greatly sceptical countrymen those true religious values that were eternally ours. Now we are past that stage when one had to go about with a begging bowl. Hinduism is no longer a collection of fancy tales or a set of mindless rituals. Hence, it should now be possible for us to fearlessly accept the teachings of holy men from all religious traditions and further embellish that which we have inherited from our forefathers.

However, even as the true worth of our religion is now revealed, there still exist some impediments to our wholly accepting them. Such failings spring from our own weaknesses. It would be only fair to admit that we started bragging about our religious inheritance even before we had gained sufficient familiarity with it. There was a time when, by sheer force of habit, we remained

[1] Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), a Brahmin reformer, polyglot, and author, was instrumental in reviving an interest in Vedanta in modern India but is remembered mostly for his support to the legal abolition of sati. Commonly taken to be a pioneer in bringing modernity to India, Rammohun was held in high respect by Tagore.

entrapped within the various aberrations related to our society and religion. Now our newly acquired vanity persuades us to claim that upholding such aberrations is a sign of strength.... These are but signs of lifelessness and decadence in the community and it is only under such conditions that man tends to attach equal value to everything. Quite indiscreetly, we have failed to set apart good from evil, truth from untruth....

The weakness evident in our enterprise is basically a weakness of character. It is because our character has failed to grow that we continue to delude ourselves and others in the line of work. Presently, we just cannot summon enough courage to expose such inane customs, rituals, or methods of worship as are inflicted upon several thousands of our men and women. Lethargy, ignorance, and unhappiness of every kind belittles and humiliates our people before the rest of the world. On the contrary, we gloss over such lack of vitality by inventing specious arguments. However, when a man's religious consciousness and strength of character

are rejuvenated, he rejects such weaknesses and failing with an overwhelming manliness. Henceforth, he ceases to rationalize his misery and wrong doing through the use of empty sentiments. From this we may reasonably deduce what our real needs are. Acquiring greater knowledge is not going to make us any stronger. So long as we are unable to fully awaken our human qualities we cannot take to the path that leads us to goodness.

In a time of crisis, only such great men will come to our aid who resisted all attempts at self-deception, rejected all falsehood, and adhered to Truth even when publicly humiliated. Some like Jesus have upheld Truth even at the cost of their lives.... From a study of his life it will be apparent that it is in the very nature of great men to embrace Truth. Such men do not necessarily establish new religious paths and forms of worship or express some quaint religious opinion. Their message is simple: they are born to call the father, a father and the brother, a brother. They make it a point to emphasize that that which is always a part of our

inner self need not be taken outside ourselves. They exhort us to awaken our minds, to cast our vision forward and to dethrone blind faith or habit....

By locating the Kingdom of Heaven[2] within man, Jesus has only placed man on a higher pedestal. If, on the other hand, this Kingdom were to be located outside man, this would have only diminished man's glory. Jesus called himself the Son of Man; his intentions were to reveal just who the Son of Man truly was. It was thus that Jesus demonstrated that humanism rests not on the fabulous wealth of empires nor in blindly conforming to customary acts. Rather he was able to establish that man's true glory lay in the fact that his heart was the seat of an indwelling God. The relationship between a father and son is the most intimate of relationships: it has nothing to do with a chain of command or some contractual obligation. Man derives his true greatness from the fact that he is the son of God, not the ruler of some empire. Hence, when Satan came before him and said 'You are king', Jesus replied, 'No, I am the Son of Man.' In so declaring, Jesus honoured entire mankind.

At one place, Jesus has spoken disapprovingly of wealth. In his view, wealth was the greatest obstacle on the road to man's salvation. This is not a statement favouring renunciation. Its true meaning *was* that the wealthy man knew wealth alone to be his true support in life. Misguided as he was, he confused mere wealth with qualities of being human. When in such a state, the true strength of his soul naturally lies hidden. It is only upon uncovering the soul that he is able to see the Power of God and that indeed is his only hope of redemption. When a man begins to understand his true self, he also finds the indwelling God....

It is because Jesus saw man in his true glory that he refused to see him merely as a machine. Just as the possession of material

[2] A Christian concept denoting the spiritual realm over which God reigns Supreme; this could also be taken to mean fulfilment of God's will on earth.

wealth by itself does not make a man greater, carrying out outward acts does not make him holier.... It is for this reason that Jesus, the Son of Man, did not take customs or scripture to be greater than man himself. It is thus that he also declared that the worship of God was better performed through pious devotion than some ritual offerings or bloody sacrifice. Having said that, he embraced the untouchable, dined in the company of the heretic, and instead of forsaking the sinner, he led him to salvation.

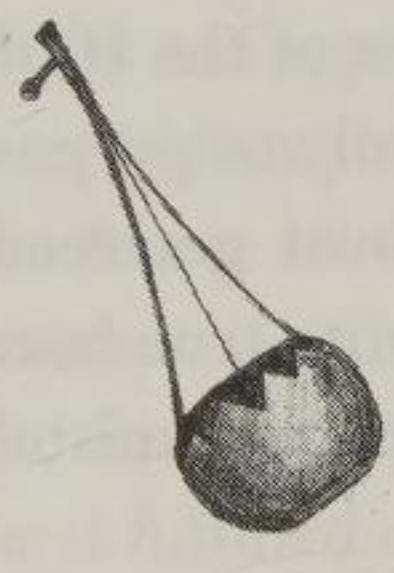
That apart, he also saw himself in all men and from there, the presence of God in all humanity. Having gathered his disciples around him he said thus: 'He who feeds the poor, feeds me; he who gifts clothes to them, dresses me up.'... Those who have genuinely accepted the teachings of Jesus do not waste their time in pompous ceremonies. Serving man is their preferred form of worship; it is an extremely demanding vow that they have taken up for themselves. Such men have given up bodily comfort and even risked their lives, travelling to distant lands only to

live among cannibals or else to dedicate themselves to nursing lepers. This they could do with ease for the man from whom they sought initiation was himself the Son of Man. It is through him that God's mercy has been revealed to us. Who else but he has preached the glory of man as fully or effectively?

His disciples took Jesus to embody suffering for it was he who demonstrated to us that the act of self-suffering was in itself a glorious act. Through this act he has made man look nobler. It is when man is able to rise above thoughts of the self that he reveals the qualities of a true human being that cannot be burnt by fire or pierced by some weapon. It is not surprising that a man who preached the love of God through the love of man should also demonstrate, through his own example, the need for taking upon oneself the pain or distress of a suffering mankind. It is of such willing self-sacrifice that the true religion of love is born. It is the love of the weak and the sentimental which merely soaks itself in tears; love that has within it the vital signs of life

finds fulfilment through selflessness and voluntarily accepting a life of suffering.

That God is revealed in man is a preaching that does not lie buried under some obscure scriptural verse. It is because Truth was so visibly manifest in Jesus's own life that even today, like some rapidly blossoming tree, it continues to throw out numerous branches....



11.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE BRAHMO SAMAJ*

... In the history of this country, the role of the Brahmo Samaj[1] has completed a full circle; the work that it had initially taken

* *Source*: 'Brahmo Samajer Sarthakata' (The Relevance of the Brahmo Samaj), address delivered on 12 Magh 1317 BS/February–March 1911; published (?) in Baisakh 1318 BS/April–May 1911. Later included in the collection *Santiniketan*; reproduced in RR, vol. 8, pp. 606–11.

[1] A reformist organization founded by Rammohun Roy in 1828. It fell defunct after Roy left for England in 1830 but was revived by the efforts of Ramchandra Vidyavagish and Debendranath Tagore. In religious matters, it was particularly opposed to image worship and the

upon itself has now come to an end. At the time of its inception, the Brahmo Samaj had prepared to tear away the shroud of lifeless custom that had covered Hindu society and robbed it of all awareness of Eternal Truth. From the perspective of the Brahmo Samaj, this willingness to critique Hindu society has now reached its logical conclusion. Hindu society has now gained a measure of self-awareness; in several ways it has now prepared itself to recover the Eternal and Noble Truth that lay buried inside it....

Now that the conscience of the Hindu society has been awakened, it can no longer blindly or purposelessly keep moving with the passage of time. It must get ready to determine its right course; it must rediscover its true bearings. Most of us commit mistakes but when we commit mistakes, we also develop the capacity to correct them.

It is therefore that I say that the work of the Brahmo Samaj has now completed a full circle. It has awakened a dormant society. But with that has the work of the Brahmo Samaj been completed? Will it be proper for it to depart once it has knocked at the doors of the rest house where travellers have been resting? Or should it continue knocking on the door even after the travellers are up and about as is the habit among some of us? Should it not now take the first strides in leading a journey? ...

There was a time, when in this miserable country the qualities of learning and devotion had been stifled by our own pettiness and aberrations. Having broken down the barriers of our narrow habits and customs, the rest of the world has now confronted us with its gigantic historical and scientific accomplishments. This forced

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worship of multiple gods/goddesses. It was also actively involved in social and political work. The Brahmo Samaj underwent two schisms in 1866 and 1878. In 1878, the three wings were known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj (under the control of the Tagores), the Bharatvarshiya Brahmo Samaj (led by Keshab Chandra), and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (led by Sibnath Sastri and others). In the early 1880s, Keshab experimented with what he called the New Dispensation Church (Nababidhan).

us to compare our own beliefs and customs with those existing elsewhere. At that hour of crisis, many of us had lost faith in this country and prevalent religious opinions. From that day to the present, the Brahmo Samaj has supported us in preserving our traditions of knowledge and devotion; it has saved us from being swept away by the tides of change.... It is now well known that by adopting a critical stance towards Hindu society and through the sheer force of its own example, the Brahmo Samaj has helped eradicate many malpractices and superstition. In particular, it has helped bring education to Indian women, to generally improve their social status and to bring to them their natural rights as human beings. But we cannot stop here. It is not enough to say that through the Brahmo Samaj we have attained greater satisfaction in religious life and fulfilled our social responsibilities. It is important that we also make its contribution fuller and more meaningful in every sense.

It would be incorrect to claim that the Brahmo Samaj represents a move to reform modern Hinduism only or that it is only a recent attempt at synthesizing knowledge and devotion. In truth, it represents a modern manifestation of the India that has eternally existed. History reveals that India has repeatedly withstood powerful attacks from new religions wanting to establish themselves. However, just as the trunk of the sandalwood tree spreads its fragrance even more on being vandalized in some way, India too, when under attack by powerful alien forces, has revived the worship of Brahman which has been very dear to her. But for this, she would not have survived these attacks.

Islam is a vigorous religious faith and a belligerent one. Wherever it has gone, Islam has succeeded in obliterating rival faiths. Such attacks have taken place in India too and its effects have been visible for several centuries. We do not have adequate information on the period when such attacks were at their peak. This is because the history of that period has not been carefully recorded. However, upon examining the lives of our various

religious figures at the time of the Muslim invasions, it will be evident that even then, India, by revealing its most precious Truth, was easily able to meet this fierce attack. A challenge posed by Truth can be met by Truth alone. Hence, when faced by fierce attacks, every community chooses one of the following two courses for itself: either it chooses to propagate Truth with greater effectiveness or else it becomes bankrupt upon being forced to give up false values that it had hitherto been harbouring. When it was time for India to speak for herself, successive religious figures helped reveal its Truth. Those of us who study the life and work of men like Nanak, Ravidas,[2] Kabir,[3] and Dadu[4] will know how very active and self-conscious India had become in defence of her spiritual traditions.

At that time, India was able to demonstrate that the Truth in Islam was by no means opposed to her own Truth. She could reveal how, within the very heart of India, there lay bountiful Truth that could call all other truth its own. It was thus that external attacks on India could merely strike at her outer fortification; they could not penetrate the heart of India or take away the precious Truth it held.

Presently, it is the West that has triumphantly announced its presence at the gates of our citadel. Was the impending attack going to be made by a friend or foe? When the attack became

[2] A popular bhakti figure from medieval north India belonging to the low caste, he was a tanner and leather worker by profession. About 39 verses by Ravidas are included in the Guru Granth Sahib.

[3] One of the best-known poets and religious figures from medieval north India, Kabir was a weaver by profession. He is identifiable with the tradition of nirgun bhakti and especially known for his socially radical messages. His verses appear in the Guru Granth Sahib and in works by other nirguni sants.

[4] Dadu was a cotton carder by profession who probably lived around 1544–1603 CE. He was based in Naraina, a few miles from Jaipur, and shared the social radicalism and non-sectarian religious view of Kabir.

imminent it appeared as though the enemy would strike a fatal arrow and the cowardly among us felt that since India had no Truth in her possession, it would have to tamely surrender to the West all that it had.... Fortunately, such a catastrophe has been averted. On hearing the footfalls of new challengers coming from the West, our modern religious figures fearlessly opened up the gates to their citadel. Into the vast spiritual wealth of India, the Western guest too has been cordially welcomed. There is now no more cause for fear; in the grand feast that is now in the offing, the East and the West will be seated side by side as friends and partners.

The historical significance of the Brahmo Samaj lies precisely in this opening up of the Eternal Spirituality of India. Our doors had been kept shut for a long time; the lock itself had rusted and the key too had gone missing. Hence, at the time gates were opened, one had to push a little harder, and to many that appeared like conflict. Now is not the time for conflict. In the present struggle, India is getting ready to reveal its true self through the Brahmo Samaj. Today, the Samaj has placed the real India in the assembly of nations. The world still needs India and it is still our hope that Indian spiritual wisdom will offer easy and effective solutions to the problems that the world now faces. The time has come when the Brahmo Samaj, devoid of any sectarian labels, is accepted on a larger scale on the grand stage of human history.

If it be true that we have accepted Brahman, then it amounts to saying that we have accepted the eternal India and are preparing to accept the spiritual progress occurring throughout the world. What it means to accept Brahman is indicated in the following Upanishadic mantra:

> *Yo debohaagnou yohapasu, yon viswam bhuvanavivesha*
> *ya aushadishu yobanaspatishu, tasmai devay namonamah.*
>
> I repeatedly bow down to that God who resides in fire, water and in this entire universe.

I bow down to He who is present in medicine and all forms of plant life.[5]

It is not enough to say that God is omnipresent. We know fire, water, and the plant creeper to be ordinary objects of daily use and, hence, our minds cognize them only partially. In such cases, our subjective feelings do not experience the more fulsome Consciousness. The Upanishadic mantra cited above beckons us to join our own consciousness to the Universal Consciousness. Experiencing Brahman in all living or non-living matter and in this entire Universe is not something that can be born in knowledge alone. We need devotion as well. We may experience the presence of Brahman everywhere and everywhere we may bow down to Him. Whenever we experience the Omnipresent, the feeling emerging from that is aesthetic feeling (rasa)....

The truth that India had acquired was lost to it at times.... Why did we lose it? This occurred because of our failure to bring about a synthesis in our spiritual lives. We were unable to pay equal attention to the inner and the outer, our spiritual and material needs. In our spiritual life, there were occasions when we over-emphasized knowledge to the extent of excluding everything else. The same was the case with devotion. Rather than channelize this devotion through work and service, we preferred to express this as emotional frenzy.

That which is not lifeless matter and cannot survive by itself, has to procure its sustenance from outside itself. When some life form (jiva) fails to obtain nutrition elsewhere, it falls back on its own bodily reserves. This may work for a while but over time the jiva weakens and ultimately dies. Likewise, our learning or devotion cannot survive long by drawing upon its own reserves of strength; it will have to seek this outside. In this country, there was a time when our minds, hearts, and bodies worked exclusive of one another and remained trapped in their

[5] *Swetaswatar Upanishad*, II:17.

own narrow existence. During the same time, the experiences of the West were perceptibly different. The West concentrated on amassing information and knowledge of the phenomenal world. It kept collecting such knowledge for the sake of collecting, to work only for the sake of working, to indulge in the material pleasures of life for its own sake. In all this, it failed to see the underlying unity of life. Even so, it was able to detect in all that it had collected a sense of order, discipline, and laws that invariably connected one phenomenon to another. What it failed to grasp though is just where the connections were forged, who controlled them, or how within them lay hidden the freedom of the human soul.

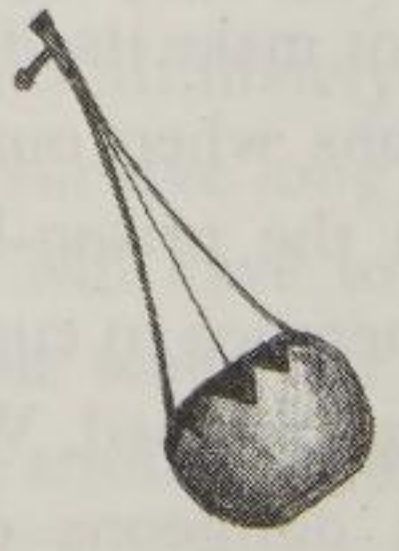
It was at this point in time that Rammohun Roy brought forth the ancient spiritual traditions of this country into the modern age. Having accepted Brahman in his life, he revealed his personal experiences to the larger world. All his thoughts, efforts, the love of humanity, respect for his country, and the concern for human welfare gathered strength from the excellence of his inner life. He did not detach Brahman from worldly life or cosmos and isolate it as an object of private meditation. On the contrary, his mission was to perceive Brahman in world history and in our everyday life and labours. In so doing, he brought India to the threshold of a new age. It is through Rammohun that India was once again able to proclaim her Truth and this proclamation was made just when our foreign teachers were about to initiate India into an altogether new spiritual life.

It is a matter of surprise that our spiritual life, centred as it was on Brahman, could not make itself adequately felt for a long time. There were occasions when our great spiritual teachers held Brahman captive in the prison-house of Knowledge. On other occasions, blind adherence to custom or devotion running wild with emotional frenzy reigned. When Rammohun rescued Brahman from the dark dungeons of some manuscript and established Him firmly in our daily lives, his countrymen were

furious. They denied that the adoration of Brahman was a part of their spiritual culture and inherited from our ancestors. Quite brazenly, they mistook this as something derived from an alien Christianity, and under this misapprehension they refused to let it re-enter their lives.

Brahman seems farthest from us when our natural strength leaves us, life becomes narrow and constricted, and knowledge is overtaken by crude imagination. In contemporary Europe, human prowess revealed itself on a massive scale. But the European was not exhibiting something unique or universally covetable. His knowledge and power had begun to control the whole world but in his hands, he also carried a banner on which was boldly inscribed the word 'I'. His objective was to ensure that the world belonged to the mighty and the powerful, and this power came riding on merchant activity, the endless buying and selling of a wide variety of merchandise....

The historical mission of the Brahmo Samaj is to present to the world that tradition of worship in its most developed form that accepts all and unites all. In India, the worship of Brahman goes back to some remote antiquity. On occasions, this worship has flown abundantly so as to burst its banks; at other times, it has been a sluggish stream that buried itself under sand. However, this stream never dried up completely. Today, we find this as an ebullient stream, carrying the blessings and goodwill of the Divine, flowing by our own houses. However, that is no reason why we should appropriate it all by ourselves....



12.

DO HINDU-BRAHMOS QUALIFY TO BE CALLED HINDUS?*

There is a certain part of our identities that is markedly stable and concrete: this is not something that one can change at will. There is, however, another part that is self-acquired—acquired through learning, habits, professions, or faith—and which is not impossible to change. Take for instance human nature. This too has a part that is eternal or unchanging and forms the very essence of a man's identity. This is the quality that sets apart a man from plants and animals. However, man's nature has another part which he can build up in his own way to give himself a distinct personality. The latter sets apart one man from another.

If everything in man was to be eternal or unchanging and there was nothing that he could create himself or have the room to exercise his Free Will, he would be no better than a lump of earth. On the other hand, if everything he had was contingent on his will or desire with no basis in his past, then he could be accused of madness or daydreaming....

Presently, there is a controversy raging in this country, especially within members of the Brahmo community, on just what to call oneself. This controversy was completely absent in the days of Rammohun Roy. Here was a man who had given up all connections with conventional faith or methods of worship; who,

* *Source*: Address delivered at the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (no date available) and first published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Baisakh 1319 BS/April–May 1912. Later included in the collection *Parichay* (1916) as 'Atmaparichay'; reproduced in RR, vol. 9 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2004), pp. 592–603.

even as a Hindu, is known to have studied the Koran, attempted to collect the essentials of Christianity from a study of the Bible, and established the Brahmo Sabha with the support of (William) Adam.[1] Rammohun was abused and socially ostracized by all and some, it is said, were even prepared to take his life had the opportunity presented itself. Notwithstanding all this, Rammohun was never seized by the slightest doubt about what to call himself. Even though thousands took him to be a non-Hindu, he never doubted his identity as a Hindu and never pondered this question for that would have been a sheer waste of time.

In the present time, some men have started thinking afresh on this question. We are now somewhat sceptical about who we truly are. We claim to be none other than Brahmos but that is only a newly created identity whose roots don't go very far. I could be a Brahmo who was formally admitted only yesterday and in that event, is there no other identity that I possess that is older and better established? This is simply not possible, I do not have the power to wipe out my past and there would have to be some connection or continuity with my past that has never been subjected to my personal will.

It is quite possible though that I may not be particularly proud of my past. That is regrettable. However, Providence does not seek our opinion on how much ancestral glory to be attached to each and there is no way in which this may be determined by voting either! Some of us may have been born into the royal family of Germany and others into ordinary, nondescript families of which there is no record in the pages of history. We might obtain some consolation by attributing this to the results of some past deed

[1] William Adam (1786–1881) was a Scottish friend and associate of Rammohun, who arrived in India in 1818 and was initially a member of the Baptist Congregation at Serampore. In 1821, under the influence of Rammohun, he took to Unitarianism whereupon his critics named him 'the second fallen Adam'! He is associated with three valuable surveys of the state of education in Bengal between 1835 and 1838.

(*karma phal*) but there is no harm either in simply accepting this the way it is without going into some profound discourse. If there be some shame or stigma attached to my identity as a Hindu, then that is something that I should be prepared to accept without a murmur of protest. Where will I find that courtroom or judge who will entertain a case filed against God (*vidhata*)?

Some members of the Brahmo community caution us by saying that if, as Brahmos, we were to call ourselves Hindus, this would be a conservative position to take and sever our relations with the Muslims. In truth, all identities carry this underlying problem. Even if I am unwilling to ascribe any identity to myself, I would be drawn into controversy with a man keen to do this. Such differences between us could even lead to violence. There will always be a difference between what I am and what I am not and an identity only concretizes such differences.

Behind such differences may be the displeasure of one party. There could be some who are aggressively opposed to me simply because I happen to be Rabindranath Tagore. If I consider this to be undesirable, then it would be my duty to remove the cause of such displeasure. If, however, this turns out to be a matter of mere prejudice, not founded on some valid or reasonable cause, then I have no choice but to carry about this burden of animosity that has unduly come to be attached to my name. Nobody will praise me, if, only to restore peace between me and my critics, I disown my own name.... Similarly, if there be discord between the Hindu and Muslim, then some may suggest that I overcome this discord by disowning my identity as a Hindu. This advice appears exceedingly simple but it is not good advice. Such advice will not yield the desired results since my denial may help me alone to bypass this problem; the Hindu–Muslim discord itself is not resolved in any way....

The point to consider here is that introducing myself as a Hindu is not the same as identifying myself as a Brahmo. In this case, one cannot occupy the place of the other. If someone

was asked, 'Are you of the Chaudhuri family?' and if he were to answer, 'No, I work as a record-keeper', then the there is no match between the question and the answer. It is possible that no one in the Chaudhuri family has worked as a record-keeper; on the other hand, it cannot be reasonably established that once a record-keeper, you cannot belong to the Chaudhuri family! Similarly, it cannot be true that the religion that Hindu society has presently determined as its own is the religion that it has been following all along. In trying to prove this, I have no wish to exhibit my scholarship and cite copious historical evidence drawn from the Vedic times to the present. There is only a general claim that I wish to make which is that a particular religious faith or custom cannot be eternally valid for a people. What the water is to the duck, a particular religion cannot be for man. Religion is not inert or lifeless matter; it evolves in keeping with the mental evolution of man himself. Hence, religion by itself cannot constitute the perennial identity of a race. Though, generally speaking, the religion of the English is Christianity and it is on the basis of that religion that their social organization is based. And yet, upon an Englishman's adopting Buddhism as his religion, he still remains English.

Likewise, Brahmo dharma may be my own religion but tomorrow I may turn a Protestant, the day after, a Roman Catholic, and the following day, a Vaishnav. Such identities, however, are only temporary identities that I acquire but as a member of a certain nation or race, my identity has been fixed by history and this truth, which has had a long history, I have not the power to change.

In Hindu society too religious faith has never stood still. The number of successive religious revolutions that this country has witnessed has never occurred elsewhere. Surprisingly, those gods and their worship that cannot be associated with the Aryans have also survived in Hindu society. Numerically, these are actually stronger. Upon studying any work on the various religious

communities in India, we shall find that not only is there variety of religious life in Hindu society but that that they have also co-existed. Apart from this, there is little else that could have kept these various forms bound together. If I were to ask someone what was the religion that qualified to be called the religion of the Hindus or what was that substance without which a Hindu could not be called a Hindu, the answer may well be that all religions have been accepted in one religious community or another as the religion of the Hindus. There could be no notion of religion that is more confusing. Some people will reject the claim that only that which is desirable and has an inner beauty and purity will qualify to be called a religion. In their view, something that has been lying on a heap of rubbish and is offensive to all sense of morality also deserves to be called religion. No matter how many people voice such claims, I will never accept this as true. Truth cannot be measured by quantitative methods.

If, simply over a matter of time, several un-Aryan and distasteful forms of religions have found a place in our society, that should not deter me from employing the standards of that religion which, on the basis of my true knowledge and devotion, I know to be superior. Not to do that would be a travesty of Truth. Such forms of religion are improper and unjust and hence cannot be a part of Hindu society or, for that matter, of any society. The question, therefore, is that if today the Hindus, out of sheer ignorance, were not to separate true religion from the false and oppose the coming of any new or higher ideals, then why must we accept present-day society as our own? One possible answer to this I have already suggested earlier which is that historically I am a Hindu and that there really cannot be any argument about this....

If, in place of Hindu society we start paying allegiance to a certain community, would it not be the duty of each member of that community to share the collective burden of that community? Even if it was apparent that members of the Brahmo Samaj

had taken to an aristocratic life style and to the worship of riches, it could not be claimed that such men alone were truly Brahmos just because they were in a majority. Quite to the contrary, we would have to maintain that only those who believed and practiced True religion had the right to be counted among Brahmos.

We have previously noted how truth cannot be quantitatively judged; it retains its value and grandeur even when found in only a small measure. However, if it should occur to me that the religion that I have adopted is the best there is, then I am also obliged to accept that to be the religion of my community. A community always redeems itself on the strength of a few who have experienced truth; the reputation of a school is carried forward not by the majority who have failed a difficult examination but the small number who have passed it. There was a time when Bengali literature found its excellence in the poetry of Michael Madhusudan (Dutt)[2] regardless of how many Bengalis spoke ill of his works. Similarly, the more a man like Rammohun was able

to rise above his circumstances, the more he was able to improve his society. I can never call him a non-Hindu just because several Hindus who were in every sense inferior to him, continued to abuse him. Why not? Because it is simply not true that he was a non-Hindu.... Just as the extraordinary genius of a Shakespeare and Newton remains the property of the average Englishman, similarly, Rammohun's views, if true, would have to be taken as true for Hindu society as a whole....

In truth, the birth of the Brahmo Samaj is but a part of Hindu history. It is through a dynamic process and in response to the pressing needs of Hindu society that the Brahmo Samaj was born. It is not a strange and quixotic institution that arrived

[2] Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) was a renowned Bengali poet of nineteenth-century Bengal, who embraced Christianity in 1843. He travelled to England to study law and was appointed barrister in 1865. He also successfully experimented with sonnets and blank verse. He, however, died in poverty due to his extravagant habits.

unexpectedly.... Just because one day the Brahmo Samaj, piercing the hard and many layered defensive shell surrounding Hinduism, had vigorously raised its head does not make it an opponent of Hinduism but its natural outcome....

I suspect that some members of the Brahmo Samaj will at once deny this, and with some irritation. They will claim that the Brahmo Samaj belongs to the entire world and not merely Hindu society. Prima facie, this is undeniable. At the same time, that which belongs to all humanity cannot be a free-floating entity: it has to be associated with a time and place and it has also to carry about a certain name.... My critics will no doubt ask that while all this talk sounds fine, what was one to do practically? The Brahmo Samaj is not simply an idea, they will say; how then are we to integrate it with Hindu society in everyday life? To this my reply would be that Hindu society cannot be taken to be a piece of lifeless matter to which men cannot actively relate.... The manners and customs that you find in it today do not represent Hindu society in all its fullness. In other words, the society of the Hindus too is on the move. Hence, it would be incorrect to say that only by fully identifying oneself with present day beliefs and customs of the Hindus can we call ourselves Hindus. Social habits or customs change in keeping with changes occurring in us. How will society survive if we were to detach ourselves from it the moment there appears some change in us? ...

What, then, is the duty before the Hindu society? To fully meet its duty and obligation (dharma), that is to say, to carry out such acts that create public welfare. How is one to determine this? There is no other way except through analysis and social experimentation. It is for a purpose that man has been gifted with intelligence.... Take the institution of caste. If we take this to be inequitable or unjust, then this would apply to Hindu society as a whole. It is this that becomes un-Hindu. Injustice cannot be the perennial feature of any society. To take that which is unjust, a delusion, or moral weakness as a permanent part of society would be a kind of atheism....

If we believe the institution of caste to be socially harmful, then that is what we should take as being truly un-Hindu. I shall not hesitate to get my children married across caste divisions or call such marriages un-Hindu, for such marriages, in my view, are ideal Hindu marriages. It is only when I am convinced that the institution of caste benefits the majority of Hindus and it is only a few that are put to any inconvenience that I can justly think of separating myself from that society. The view that there never were inter-caste marriages in Hindu society is wrong and to say that such marriages can never be popularized is equally wrong. I do not consider it proper to judge matters entirely by the present, overlooking the past history of an institution or what it might develop into in the future....

I expect my critics to next ask: 'But whose help shall we seek in fighting caste?' Why! Seek the help of those whose help you have been seeking so far, that is, of people who do not support the institution of caste. Now it might be alleged that all this will

give rise to a new society. But no, it is not a new society that can be thus created but some special community. I have already explained how a community can never replace society as a whole. I have been born into Hindu society and I have accepted Brahmo Samaj as my religious community. If I so wished, I could accept the membership of some other religious community but how am I going to change my social roots? The history of my society is not identical to my personal history. The fruits from a tree can be transferred from one basket to another but not from one branch of the parent tree to another.

Is it that upon embracing Islam or Christianity, one could still remain a Hindu? Of course one can. There is really no cause for debate here. Regardless of what the Hindus have to say, it is true that Rev. Kalicharan Banerjee[3] was a Hindu-Christian, as

[3] Kalicharan Banerjee (1847–1907) embraced Christianity at the age of 16. A successful lawyer and later appointed principal of General Assembly's Institution (later renamed Scottish Church College). He was

was Gyanendramohan Tagore[4] before him. They were Hindus by race and Christians by religious persuasion. Christianity is only a colour that they have cosmetically acquired; remaining Hindu was the substantive part. There are thousands and thousands of Muslims in Bengal whom the Hindus have been consistently calling non-Hindus and this is also what they have been telling themselves. In truth, they are genuinely Hindu-Muslim. Is it not conceivable that in a Hindu family, one brother is a Hindu, another a Muslim, and a third a Vaishnav, all living under the affectionate care of their parents? This is quite conceivable since this is the Truth.... What exists presently though is quite opposed to the Truth and a social nightmare....

The terms Hindu and Muslim carry different meanings. The term Muslim indicates a man belonging to a particular religion, not so the term Hindu. The term Hindu essentially indicates an ethnic category derived from the unfolding of Indian history. It is a legacy that has reached us through the passage of several centuries, carrying within it the cumulative experience of the human mind and heart, a shared sky, rivers and streams, forests and hills. How could Kalicharan Banerjee, Gyanendramaohan Tagore, and Krishnamohan Bandopadhyay[5] have possibly cut themselves off from this deep-rooted legacy just by converting to Christianity? The unity of a race is a far bigger thing than mere religious

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a founder member of the India League (1875) and an active member of the Indian National Congress.

[4] Gyanendramohan Tagore (1826–1890) was the son of Prasanna Kumar Tagore of the Pathuriaghata branch of the Tagore family. He embraced Christianity in 1851. He was appointed professor of Hindu Law and the Bengali language at the London University. He was also a highly successful lawyer and the first Asian barrister.

[5] Krishnamohan Bandopadhyay (1813–1885) was an eminent author, educationist, and evangelist, who embraced Christianity under the influence of Rev. Alexander Duff. He was the first Bengali to be appointed minister, and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Law and CIE in 1876.

opinion and much closer to our very being: a change in religious opinion does not lead to a change in one's racial origins....

Even though I know very little about Chinese Muslims, I can emphatically state that while they may share a few things with Bengali Muslims, there is a lot more that they do not share. Even in the matter of religious doctrines, there may be broad similarities but also finer distinctions. In truth, Chinese Muslims may more resemble local Confucians or Buddhists. In Persia today, older forms of religion have not survived; Muslim conquerors have established Islam as the only religion in that country. And yet Islam in Persia has acquired several features that are determined by racial characteristics of earlier inhabitants.

India cannot be an exception to this rule. Here too our characteristics as a people are more widespread than is our religious opinion. There are numerous instances of this kind within Hindu society itself. Such customs, as were once forbidden to Hindus, are now being openly practised today. We know of several Hindus who, in their writings and speeches, claim to scrupulously adhere to prescribed ritual and custom, and yet even a cursory glance at the list of items on their dinner table will leave the likes of Manu, Parashar, and Raghunandan[6] squirming. The Hinduism (Hindutva)[7] of such people is not based on what they write or speak, not even on everyday manners or customs they follow. This has a deeper foundation. It is, thus, that today those who refuse to go by prescribed rules of conduct and are not as respectful to their gurus are also counted among Hindus. This is not because Hindu society is weak or powerless; rather it is because even

[6] Manu and Parashar are lawgivers (*smartas*) from early India. Raghunandan Bhattacharya was a famous lawgiver of Nadia in Bengal and a contemporary of Chaitanya who wrote a commentary on Jimutavahana's twelfth-century work *Dayabhaga*.

[7] In Hindu Bengal, the term 'Hindutva' was earlier used by the conservative essayist Chandranath Basu (1844–1910) but in the sense of a Hindu cultural view or, more generally, 'Hinduness' and not as a political ideology as in the case of Savarkar.

when oppressed by hidebound customs, Hindus can at least feel that true Hinduism cannot remain so narrowly circumscribed....

In case even a single reader of mine has had the patience to stay with me thus far, the last question he is bound to throw at me is the following: 'If Hinduism is not bound by caste rules and if this is not compromised by a man's accepting Islam or Christianity, what then is Hinduism? How does one make out a Hindu?' If I am obliged to answer this question so is he. And no matter what he says by way of a reply, this is bound to be countered by someone within the vast body of Hinduism. Ultimately, he too is apt to say that the religious faith or manners that one community has known as Hindu constitutes the essence of Hinduism for that community. Anything outside this is considered un-Hindu. Thus, what is distasteful for the Bengali Hindu is not so for the Hindus of the Punjab, and what is not a matter of shame for the Hindus of south India is not shameful for the Hindus of Kanauj.

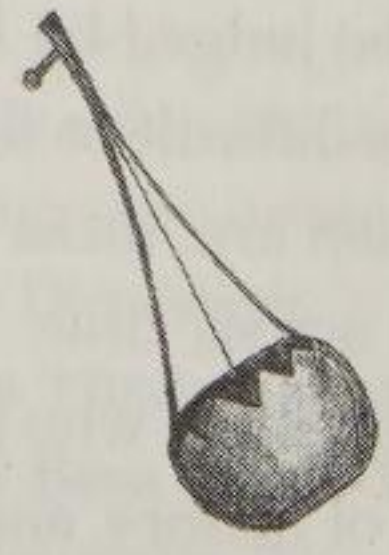
Such is the strange definition of Hinduism that we will be bound to deliver if we were to judge Hinduism only by its externals. But this is an unjust method of judging any community. And just because Hindu society has carried this out on itself, I am not in a position to say that this is what it truly deserves. It is a well-known fact that the opinion a man has about himself is often wrong.

It is very difficult for a descriptive category to locate and represent the essential unity of Man since this is a complex matter. In it, there is both stillness and movement. If I judge matters by looking merely at what is static, then the potentialities of movement that also lie within it start protesting. On the other hand, any judgement based on movement alone can be of little use since in this I fail to secure a foothold. Hence, life must be judged by life itself, not by some concept that lies outside it. It is difficult to formulate what the essential characteristics of Englishmen are: these would differ so much from one man and another and across time. Thus, all I can reasonably say is that the English are a people who inhabit a certain part of the world, have a shared sense of history, and, notwithstanding any differences related to time or character, still constitute a single race....

We in India have a similar thread of unity that binds us all together. Its existence does not depend on whether or not I am aware of it. And yet once I acknowledge this I only grow stronger as do the bonds of unity....

Hence, it is important that I acknowledge my birth as a Hindu. That which is truly excellent in me, whether in the domain of knowledge, emotions, or action does not belong to me alone, not even to my community but to my society as a whole.... The religion that we Brahmos have accepted is truly universal, and yet it is the religion of the Hindus. This universal religion we have conceived and developed through the mind of the Hindu. It is not only in the name Brahman, not even in its very conception, but also in our methods of worship that there lies a distinctiveness, and in this distinctiveness we witness the flowering of the philosophy of the Hindus, of their devotion, their mysticism, their festivals, institutions, and their meditation. It is this grand confluence of thought and deed that makes it so valuable to the world....

I am aware of the claims that some Brahmos make to the effect that the Brahmo Samaj has been influenced more by Christianity than by Hinduism. The reason why we are led to believe this is because of the greater importance that we tend to attach to things which we obtain from the outside. A man is naturally more pleased by the bonus that he obtains outside his monthly salary. That which we have imbibed from the Hindus is so closely enmeshed with our very existence that we fail to see it. Sadly, that also prevents us from acknowledging it as something that we have only truly gained....



13.
JEEBONDEBATA*

The difference between Jeebondebata (the Lord of my life) and God is that between two different aspects or attitudes. Intrinsically, they are the same. There is a certain space where God is entirely mine; in that space, there is just Him and me. Within this there is no room for the material world and everyday social life or, for that matter, friends and relatives. This relationship is deep and mysterious. In that private world, I am alone. However, there is yet another point at which my personality merges with the universal. Jeebondebata resides within me but also goes beyond me, towards that indivisible, infinite, inexpressible joy represented by Viswadebata (the Lord of the Universe).

Jeebondebata leans towards finite personalities, Viswadebata towards the Absolute and the Universal. We get acquainted with Viswadebata in the course of our everyday social life. There we join in His collective worship, we acknowledge His presence in all. It is this worship that sustains the bonds of humanity.

The God that I get to know through movements in history and whose presence I feel in universal humanity is Viswadebata. But where my personal experiences come in contact with the Infinite and begin to progressively reveal Him is the place where I find my Jeebondebata. My life has been full of events though many

* *Source*: Informal talk delivered at Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore on 3 October 1921 before students and invitees. The transcript, as prepared by Pradyot Sengupta, first appeared in the journal *Desh*, vol. 35, no. 11. Reprinted in Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Jeebondebata: Rabindra Rachana Sankalan* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2010), pp. 136–41.

memories of my early years are now lost to me. All the same, the garland strung together by the thread of my personal reminiscences goes to adorn Jeebondebata.

With every individual, Jeebondebata occupies a distinct space and each of these spaces is made unique by a different configuration. Each of us is aware of the world that they are located in but my own world takes me even beyond this awareness. And yet it is quite evident to me that what holds together these discrete worlds is an underlying sense of unity. You ask if the song 'Have you not heard his silent steps?' from the *Gitanjali* is a song to the Lord. This particular poem alludes to the sound of His approaching footsteps and which all may hear since his impending arrival is but the eternal Truth. However, the special experiences through which I have gained this Truth is entirely my own. In my poem 'Jeebondebata'[1] which has captured this Truth, I refer to an experience that may be replicated in every man's life. My own spiritual realization has been of two kinds: first, there is the intensely

personal experience and second, the impersonal experience of the Transcendent as found in the Upanishads.

Jeebondebata is not an entity entirely independent of Viswadebata. God is indissolubly connected with me through this world. At the same time, he is united with me alone to the exclusion of the rest of the world. One cannot construct a dividing wall between these two kinds of unions. These two paths may be likened to the two ways in which a chaste wife exhibits her love and loyalty towards her husband. The wife busies herself with a variety of household chores with great interest and pleasure. In everyday life, she serves her husband through the care and devotion she reveals in handling routine domestic work. It is the love for her husband that inspires her to take good care of relatives and those who help her with domestic work. But the wife's love is expressed in yet another way. Outside her care and concern for friends and relatives, she is also tied to her husband in a close

[1] Composed on 21 Magh 1302 BS/February 1896.

and intimate relationship. Here, she is essentially a devoted wife, the woman who looks up to her husband and finds delight in the love that the husband shows for her. Similarly, there are two sides to our relationship with God. Where the union is external or outward-looking, one finds Viswadebata; where it is internal or inward-looking, we have Jeebondebata.

I would say that God is manifest in three aspects. First, there is the aspect where He rules over the supra-sensory, lying beyond both me and my social life. Second, there is He who occupies the centre stage in respect of me and my world. Here, He is the Lord of the Universe. Finally, there is the God who is exclusively mine, a God that relates only to me. These represent respectively the transcendental or abstract, the subjective, and the objective aspects of God....

It is my belief that there might come the day when we shall become fully conscious of our own private worlds. At this stage, we see the many streams of consciousness in broken and fragmented forms and this renders it difficult to read any concrete meaning into our feelings and experiences. However, when such sundry experiences are suitably arranged, we would discover a glow even within that which appears grotesque and misshapen to the naked eye. At that auspicious hour, the vital, inner meaning of world-drama will reveal itself to me. Thereafter, a wholesome feeling of peace will occupy my inner consciousness. At present, my spiritual world is much too dominated by the power that dismantles and destroys; it is only momentarily that I get to sense the creative world around me.... As of now, my dissipated consciousness is full of gaping holes. But there will come a time when my guiding star will reveal its blissful side and engage in creativity. Once that happens, the subconscious will touch the conscious. He who revels in creation, the God who presides over this joyous creativeness, is Jeebondebata....

Just as many of my poems are personal, they have a universal side as well since my Jeebondebata resides both within me and

outside. There is a certain spot where my personality merges with the world. The approach that you found in my poem 'Have you not heard his silent steps?' could be understood as a part of the experience of Universal Man (*Viswamanav*). I wish His footfalls would be heard by all at every place and across time. Our awaiting the arrival of God in history is the eternal Truth, not a matter of personal experience....

The underlying spirit of Vaishnav poetry is personal and that of the Upanishads, universal. The two follow different spiritual paths. The idea of Jeebondebata is growing and progressively taking shape but the God of Vaishnav poetry is permanently located in some specific symbolism and confined to a particular religious view. I have tried to understand Jeebondebata in various ways by changing the imagery every time. In other words, there are innumerable streams of consciousness possible in every individual. I love Jeebondebata as I have now come to know. Those who are dear to me are now also the objects of my love. It is because I

can perceive the Infinite even in finite beings that I have strongly clung to them. Just as I have known this God in love and loving union, He too has rendered my life desirable and sweet even amidst the painful separation caused by death, albeit in a different way.

In this manner, I have taken shelter at the feet of Viswadebata, having crossed over Jeebondebata. There I have found Him manifest in His true glory. When thus uniting with Him, I have left behind all my friends and companions. The ecstasy born of this love is entirely impersonal.

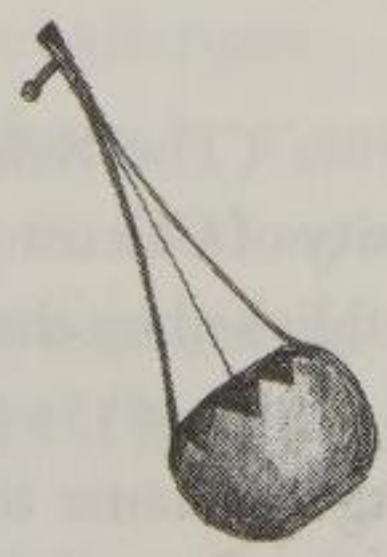
The Joy that I describe is comparable to a bird soaring in the skies, with its wings fully spread. This is the joy that comes from immersing ourselves in Truth, of attaining liberation, of overcoming all finitude, of freely soaring in the sky. The drama of my life that unfolds itself through events produces only relative joy. When from Jeebondebata I move to an acquaintance with Viswadebata, that relativity gives way to the boundless joy of crossing over the world of sense perceptions.

If you asked which side my poetry leaned on, I would say that it leaned on the side of the Upanishads. I really cannot express in words the profound Truth that verses from the Upanishads have conveyed to me. When trying to express this Truth, I have naturally to refrain from using 'I' and 'you' for the Upanishads speak of the indivisible and inexpressible Infinite.

It is not as though in my poetry, the aspect celebrating Jeebondebata persists; it is only that, occasionally, this side has been revealed more.

Just as in my childhood I was fascinated by the idealism of Vaishnav poetry, in my later life the Upanishads have cast a greater influence upon me. At first, I could not understand Upanishadic verses but once I was called upon to comment on them, I tried to understand the same verse in a thousand different ways in the light of my personal experiences. This is experience that I have gathered in my spiritual life. But my poetry also conveys matters entirely unconnected with my life. In my poetry, there is a mixing of these two streams though I would have to say that the Upanishadic stream is the stronger of the two. When the human soul joins the Divine, there can be no talk of personalities.

It is usually held that in Vaishnav poetry, the feeling of separation is the abiding truth. On the other hand, if 'I' and 'you' are eternally kept separated from one another, there can be no union such as I desire. In the Upanishads, there is no importance paid to the 'I'. Rather, they speak of the joy derived from fully sinking one's ego in the Infinite. My poetry now strives to attain that impersonal bliss....



14.
THE RELIGION OF MAN*

... Physically, all life forms are independent of one another and each tries to protect itself in its own way. In this lies a fierce competition. Man seeks like-mindedness and often manages to obtain that. When this eludes him, he feels despondent. He knows that his success lies in mutual cooperation. He realizes that he is only one among many and that his own consciousness comes to fruition only upon being joined to that of the Universal Man. It occurs to him that the more he joins others in the domains of learning, actions, or feelings, the closer he draws to the Truth.

This unity of feeling forms the basis of human civilization. Hence, the highest manifestation of man is that in which he is able to unite with all across time and space. The progressive refining of the Universal Mind represents the state of excellence in all human self-expression. As an individual develops, he also sheds his individuality and strives to integrate with Man. This Man resides in each of our souls. His outward form may vary from country to country, society to society, or from race to race but inwardly, He is One....

Man has two aspects to his existence: in him there is individuality and there is universality. The individual clings onto his

* *Source*: 'Manusher Dharma' (The Religion of Man), Kamala Lectures delivered at the University of Calcutta for the year 1933, on 16, 18, and 20 January 1933. First published by the Calcutta University in May 1933; reproduced in RR, vol. 10, pp. 617–49. This lecture has overlaps with the 1930 lecture bearing the same title delivered at Manchester College, Oxford, but is also different in certain respects.

physical existence; his life is the fulfilment of recurring worldly needs. But that aspect of man which outgrows such mundane needs constructs an ideal for itself. That ideal is not some commonplace need like food or clothing; it is the passionate cry of our souls. This ideal gives us a sense of direction, it beckons man to fullness, to go beyond his little self and unite with the Universal Man....

Knowledge can be useful but Truth is an asset and the quality of this asset is not to address ordinary problems such as the removal of poverty but to awaken a feeling of greatness in man. It is then that the man possessing this asset declares '*bhumaiva (tat) sukham nalpe sukhamasti*'[1]—happiness comes not through some petty things in life but that which is larger. Ordinarily, happiness is measured by comparing what we obtain with what we desire.... However, the shastras say: 'He who seeks satisfaction also exercises restraint when pursuing happiness.' Prima facie, this looks baffling; how could we say that satisfaction is not to be found in happiness and yet claim that it is happiness that leads to satisfaction? This occurs because there is duality in man's nature. That part of him which is purely physical finds happiness in obtaining the desired objects. But inwardly, man seeks to unite with the Universal Man, and then it is not mere happiness that he wants but something larger. It seeks the Omnipresent. When compared with animals, it is man alone who goes to excesses. He seeks abundantly and gives away abundantly too because there is in him the Universal Man. This Man does not seek happiness nor does he fear suffering. All that he does is to break down the placid and comfortable life that we have created for ourselves and lead us on to the road full of challenges....

In the Upanishads, there is a set of questions and answers related to God; where is God established, it asks, and then answers in the following manner: in His own Glory. This Glory constitutes His nature and it is in this nature that he finds delight.

[1] *Chandogya Upanishad*, VII:24:1.

Man's happiness too rests on his own glory. Hence the saying: 'bhumaiva sukham'. But this glory is obtained only through struggle and conflict; man finds his highest contentment through the greatest suffering. There is a perpetual conflict between the natural state of man (*sahaja*) and his earthly life. Hence the challenging path of dharma....

With an animal, its nature reflects its state of existence. Its desires go only up to the extent of its needs. The animal never demands more than it requires. The case with man is very different. There may be limits to his needs but not to his desires. Man's worldly existence runs on his day to day needs; his glory, however, is revealed in what he acquires over and above this. Man's material progress depends on his ability to discover and employ to his advantage, the powers of nature; his spiritual progress depends on the discovery of an esoteric Truth that can be obtained only through spiritual praxis. That praxis is the pursuit of religion (dharma sadhana).

The word dharma means nature. At first sight, this may look self-conflicting since the suggestion here is that only in overcoming our nature do we obtain our nature. Christian scriptures have spoken ill of human nature; they have found sin and insubordination to lie at its very roots. Our scriptures too speak of crossing over our given nature when approaching Truth. It is man's nature not to value that which comes to him easily or naturally. He prefers to have that which he has acquired through his efforts to that with which he was born. One of these he takes to be related to his worldly existence, the other to the Divine. It is said in the Upanishads:

> *Sreyascha preyaschamanushyameta satau samparitya vivinakti dhira,*
> *tayoh shreyas abodanasye sadhu hiyatehartha ya u preyovrinite.*[2]

[2] *Katha Upanishad*, I.2.2. There seems to be some difference in text pertaining to this particular shloka. The version that I have consulted reads as follows: '*Sreyascha preyaschamanushyamatastau satau vivinakti*

> Human nature has two sides to it: that which is good (shreyas) and that which is desired (preyas).
> The wise are able to separate the two. He who chooses shreyas is wise; he who chooses preyas falls from virtue.

Such words we habitually take to be moral teachings, valuable only in as much as they regulate our daily lives. But the above words were not directed at society; their import is spiritual, advising us to take the soul as the Truth.

Human nature harbours preyas which drives us to do what we ordinarily desire. It is not as though man gains something by choosing to go with shreyas. It is possible though that by doing this, he turns himself into something auspicious and holy. Shreyas will not bring us riches or power and through it a man may or may not get any social respect. On the contrary, it is entirely possible that he may be humiliated for the opinion that he holds. The world of nature does not quite know what it means to be holy. The same is the case with shreyas. But in the Upanishadic view, by choosing to go with preyas, a man only devalues himself. Let us cite an example. If, for instance, the word '*nagar*' were to mean a libertine and not a citizen, then it would be apt to say that the word has suffered in value and meaning. Likewise, by adopting preyas, man only undermines the Truth that he represents. To experience eternal and universal humanity in oneself is holiness; to be detached from that experience leads to the humbling of man. There would be little to talk about if over and above his material self, man did not also possess the spiritual....

While all other life forms wander about, seeking some meaning to their existence, man is surprised at discovering this within him. He discovers Him who gives meaning to life. This is a Truth that

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dhira, shreyo hi dhirohovi preyaso vrinite preyo mando ygakhemat vrinite.' See Atul Chandra Sen, Sitanath Tattwabhushan, and Mahesh Chandra Ghosh (eds and trans), *Upanishads* (Calcutta: Haraf Prakashani, 1989 [5th reprint]).

is buried in his own soul and it is this that proclaims man's glory. Man must prove his own glory; only then will it be established that he is man.... Man's God is He who resides in his own heart. The more we approach excellence, whether through our learning or activity, the closer we draw to Him.... Man's suffering arises from losing this Man of the Heart, by looking for Him outside himself. When that happens, we begin to measure ourselves in wealth, fame, or objects of material pleasure. From this arises all the pain and conflict that man has to suffer....

While differences of time and space will continue to separate man from man, there remains within mankind a deep-rooted unity. This sense of unity, not cognizable by our senses, does not relate to the collective; it transcends the collective. There is one Soul that holds everything together but manifests Itself in all. The great man (mahatma) is he who can experience that One Soul in every human soul; they alone are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of humanity. The rationalist is likely to

reject such a claim; rather, he will argue that by holding on to God so dearly, we only ascribe human qualities to God. To him I would say that this amounts only to experiencing humanity in God, not ascribing human qualities to Him. Man has come to God only after he has realized the glories of being man. A man cannot protest at finding his own presence in his own God. That would not be his Truth....

It is pointless to give any name to that which lies beyond human existence. He defies all value judgement; He is neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly. Our relation to Him cannot be understood in moral terms. All we can say is that He exists. Some have claimed that it is possible for us to merge with the Infinite through the cessation of all thought. This is not a matter of debate or argument. How can we possibly cognize something without our mental processes at work? Whatever we accept and in whatever manner we accept, it is a function of our mind. Hence, that which the mind itself refuses to cognize cannot be anything but a void.

In that case, the world itself will have to be taken as the Truth. Man has indeed been heard to make this agnostic claim but this is not something that the rationalist too can claim. Scientific knowledge tells us that the world that we know or the one that we hope to know some day is the world of men. In other words, this is a world that man experiences within the framework of intelligence. How then are we to call the profound secrets of the world supra-human which man comprehends using his thought processes? It is for this reason that a scholar has claimed that the universe is the creation of a mathematical mind. But that mathematical mind too cannot go beyond the human mind. If it could, we would not have gained any scientific knowledge of this world just as cats and dogs cannot. In our philosophy, He, who has been described as the Absolute with qualities (saguna Brahman), is said to combine in Itself all qualities that are determined by our senses (*sarvaindriya-gunabhasham*). In other words, all our sense perceptions, whether they relate to the external world or the internal, are indicated in Brahman. This means that Brahman resides in man, and, hence, His world is that constituted by men. If there be any world other than this, then it does not relate to us and it never has.

This world I know through my perception. That which knows is my soul. The soul also knows itself. But this self-revealed soul is not alone. There are numerous others and that in which all souls realize themselves is paramatman (the Great Soul). This paramatman is eternally present in every human heart....

It has been said that all our sensory qualities are indicated in paramatman but even that does not say it all. The most intimate of ties that connects one soul to another is love. Our perception of the material world is through our sense perceptions; with the spiritual world it is through love. Man becomes familiar with spiritual love even as he is born through the love shown by his parents.... The question arises: on what Truth is this itself founded? The properties of clay may be examined by physically examining it; the mysteries of parental love we may discern only

in the depths of our souls where also resides the parent of parents. This parent is not to be found in any particular heaven or in historical time and space. He is not incarnated as a particular human being but provides fulfilment to entire humanity through His love. He beckons us to travel on a difficult road on our way to attain fullness. He leads us from untruth to Truth, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality. This is a journey made possible only through our penance and suffering....

Man is never the settled citizen. Animals have their homes; man only has the road on which to travel. The greatest of men create this pathway and lead the rest on that path. When the Buddha was once asked to reveal the secrets of life, he said that his mission was only to show the path, not reveal any secrets. In every age, man demolishes in frenzy values or objectives to which he had been attached in the preceding age. There is in him the tendency to repeatedly demolish homes that he has himself constructed so that he may once again take the road to set out on a new journey. What Truth does this prove? The Upanishads say: He has transcended both the mind and senses. If he had not done this, man too could not have gone beyond himself....

For man, excellence is that which is acceptable to all people in all ages. This is excellence man uses to reveal himself. In other words, it is through his own soul that he reveals other souls. It is through the fullness of this revelation that man awakens himself; it is when this turns grotesque that he falls. The signs of decay first appear amidst a material civilization when the inebriated, self-seeking individual rebels against the Eternal Man. Are there signs of this not already visible in the West? The West has ample scientific knowledge, bodily strength, economic resources, and the power of intelligence, and even these have proved incapable of protecting man. Driven by national pride, man's desire to conquer and control the world leads to a diminution of humanity itself. Under those conditions, there is no limit to cruelty and deceit in politics and fear or doubt increase manifold. Following this, the

religion of man comes under attack, and religion, when under attack, returns the attack.... This leads to the demise of the soul which is not enclosed by boundaries of any nation or community but eternally belongs to mankind. With an animal, extending the sphere of existence does not strike at the Truth; for man, this is un-Truth and opposed to religion....

As man advances, his understanding of God too is progressively freed of errors. At least that ought to be the case. However, the expected often fails to happen because we falsely take everything about religion to be fixed or unchanging. We forget that just because we believe the eternal values of religion to be true for all times, the same cannot be said of religious opinions. Science is based on some truths but all scientific opinion cannot for that reason be also true. Orthodoxy might lead us to still think that the sun revolves around the earth! The error that we commit is in confusing sectarian views for religion. Such errors then give rise to conflicts, cruelty, and blind superstitions such as the world will have never known in other fields....

It is to be admitted though that only human beings commit errors, not animals. Erroneous ideas have arisen since the earliest of times and this is because man is strongly driven by notions of the collective. When a certain fact appears before him, man does not accept it at once. To know it more fully, he resorts to imagination. The nature of this imagination may range from ignorance to knowledge, from the beautiful to the ugly, from the cruel to the compassionate. The basic issue here is that man belies such discrete feeling to be subsumed by an intangible Universal Truth. His eagerness to perceive the Whole also positively affects his perception of the Omnipresent....

Man begins to know himself only when he abstains from wrongdoing and works for public causes. A wise man is able to perceive the Man in man. How? By doing good: he comprehends it all through the Ideal Man. It is in humanity that Truth and Goodness reside and it is only after he crosses the threshold of his

ego that man gets to know his larger spiritual Self; it is then that he learns his real nature....

It is not the purpose of this essay to assess the value of shreyas in relation to our society or the state. Rather, we seek to determine just where it is founded and upon what Truth. Even though such an ideal is in conflict with the self-seeking nature of our everyday lives, man still regards shreyas as the highest definition of his self. He calls it his religion or true nature. My purpose here is to explain why this becomes possible and what aspect of man's religion this helps to bring out. There has been a perennial conflict between what occurs and what ought to occur and in explaining this conflict, I have pointed out the two sides to man. On one side is the Great Man and on the other, the man bound by petty self-interest. The effort at reconciling these two constitutes man's religion, albeit expressed in different manners or forms. If this was not so, we would have been driven purely by matters of personal liking and convenience and, in that case, values like religion or the lack of it or human welfare or the lack of it would have ceased to have any meaning....

Where lies the source of the human will to produce public welfare? If this was something as natural to us as the appetite for food or drink, striving for it would not have been necessary. I would say that this will is present in the mind of the Universal Man. By this I do not wish to suggest that the Universal Mind is made up by an aggregate of all human minds. Undoubtedly, the individual mind seeks refuge in the Universal Mind but this is not to say that the Universal Mind is nothing apart from all the minds put together. If that were so, then all that exists would be the Truth, there would have been simply no space for that which was possible in the days to come. In truth, human history gives greater importance to that which has not yet occurred but may occur. It is the promise of a possibility that has driven human civilization to go beyond its current state of existence, age after age. Once that promise recedes, society

becomes dull and unattractive for the lack of Truth. The second question to ask here is whether the Universal Mind too may experience feelings of happiness and unhappiness. On reflection we will discover that ordinary feeling within the bounds of our ego undergoes a transformation within the soul. The man who has dedicated his life to Truth and to his bigger Self manages to invert the commonplace meanings of happiness and unhappiness. He can promptly forsake happiness and accept suffering. In our ordinary lives, the importance of happiness and unhappiness may be great but this undergoes change once man goes beyond self-interest. In that state, his forbearance even amidst great hardship, his forgiveness even after being humiliated, assumes the quality of the extraordinary....

The Universal Mind nurtures the hope that one day, by overcoming our frailties and lack of fullness, it will be possible for us to unite with the Whole where reside Bliss and Auspiciousness. Age after age, the invitation comes to us to awaken our love towards Him and thereby make worthy His own love for us.... In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, there is an extraordinary saying:

> *Atho yohanyam devatam upaste anyohasau anyo hoham asmiti*
> *na sa veda yath pashuraam sa devanam.*
> The man who worships a different god and finds that god to be eternally separated from me is no better than the animal belonging to the gods.

Such an imaginary god keeps man in captivity and forces him to look for God outside himself. In that state, man is humiliated and detached from his soul by the god of his own making. The same message is repeated by the illiterate Baul singer,[3] utterly

[3] In Bengal, Bauls comprise a quotidian, non-conformist religious community. They follow no texts, reject sectarian differences, caste, and ritual, and employ songs as the medium of religious communication. However, the institution of the (spiritual) guru is important. Their origin is obscure but Bauls have known to exist since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

unfamiliar with the shastras. He knows his God in his own being and calls him 'maner manush' (man of my heart). He sings: 'Search ye, the man of your heart lies within you!'

In human history, there have arisen many religious communities that have found the worship of inert objects made of wood or stone to be false and in every way inferior. In defence of their views, they are even prepared to go to war. Admittedly, such objects lie outside man; in these, one will not find the Eternal and Omnipresent Man. But such fallacies are true of many other faiths which have images decorated in unnatural ways. Such idolatry prides itself on being non-idolatrous simply because the justifications used here are more sophisticated. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* has found even this to be an inferior form of worship. It affirms that by separating God from oneself and by accepting that which lies outside, man only distances himself from Truth.

We are likely to hear some objections lodged against this line of argument. Is man then to worship himself, some people will ask angrily. But is it possible to worship oneself? If yes, this has to be understood as only the assertion of the human ego.

The truth is quite the opposite. Self-assertion is born of the ego and even the animal is capable of this. To perceive the Omnipresent God in one's soul, detached from one's ego is possible only with man. This God is not to be found in routine activities of life or in ritual acts and offerings but in pure knowledge, pure love, and pure activism. To worship a God that lies outside oneself through prescribed religious acts is all too easy. To perceive and accept Him in one's life and thought is far more difficult....

In our country, the tradition of equating oneself with God (*so-aham*) is not as steeped in vanity as it sounds. This is not an attempt to make the humble appear big; it is an attempt to acknowledge the pervasiveness of Truth. The Universal Self

includes within it my personal self. But he who believes that by growing matted locks of hair, smearing ashes on one's body, and repeatedly crying out '*sohaham*', one expresses the Truth is the one truly affected by vanity.... To the extent we are able to realize in our lives and in society the individual and the Universal, we also realize our humanity. Qualities inimical to man are qualities that destroy this unity of experience, isolating the self from the universal.

Hence the Upanishadic saying—*ma griddha*[4]—do not be greedy. It is greed that transforms the Universal Man into a worldly man. That which belongs to Man is something over which every man has a claim. This manifests itself in our literature, in our arts and crafts, in the daily life of man, in the hospitality that he shows to a fellow man. It is thus that our shastras say *athiti devo bhava*: the guest is God Himself. In serving his guest, the householder comes to believe that what belongs to him also belongs to everyone else....

In this country, there are ascetics who understand the philosophy of sohaham[5] as the total abstinence from all work. They subject their bodies to great discomfort and pain so as to overcome natural bodily responses; they also give up their responsibilities so as not to be implicated in worldly life and existence. They renounce the ego which may be sunk in material desires but also the soul that is joined to other souls. He whom they call the Omnipresent God is not He who the Upanishad also describes or He who is present in all souls. Their God is devoid of every quality and perpetually freed from all action. They do not acknowledge Him who is the Great Architect of this universe and in whom knowledge and action are but natural, endlessly manifest across time and space....

[4] *Isha Upanishad*, I.

[5] sa + aham = sohaham, suggesting an identity between man and the Divine. This occurs in verse 16 of the *Isha Upanishad*.

From my friend Kshitimohan Sen,[6] who has with him a great stock of medieval Indian poetry, I have obtained the following verses from the poet Rajjab:[7]

Sab sanch mile so sanchi hai, na mile so jhuth
Jan Rajjab sanchi kahi, bhavai rijhi, bhavai ruth.
That which conforms to all truths is true; that which does not, is false
Rajjab says this alone is the Truth irrespective of whether my words produce pleasure or displeasure.

It is quite apparent that in Rajjab's opinion, more people than not are likely to be displeased at such words. Such people continue to hold as true even that which does not conform to the Universal Truth. The fact that the Universal Truth does not match what they hold as true causes them anger and excitement. Anger is not the way to dispute Truth; this would be like trying to pierce a flame with a knife....

One day the Brahmin Ramananda[8] left his upper-caste disciples to embrace Nabha, the *chandal*, Kabir the Muslim weaver, and Ravidas the cobbler. His society then proceeded to make him an outcast. However, this did not prevent him from ascending to the level of the Universal Man. In his day, defying the ridicule of

[6] Kshitimohan Sen (1880–1960) was born in Kashi and trained as a Sanskrit scholar. For a time, he initially served the Chamba state, and in 1908, joined Santiniketan at the invitation of Rabindranath. He served as principal of Vidya Bhavana at Visva-Bharati and briefly as its vice chancellor. Visva-Bharati conferred on him the title of Desikottama in 1952. He greatly contributed towards reviving an interest in medieval sant poetry and in Bauls.

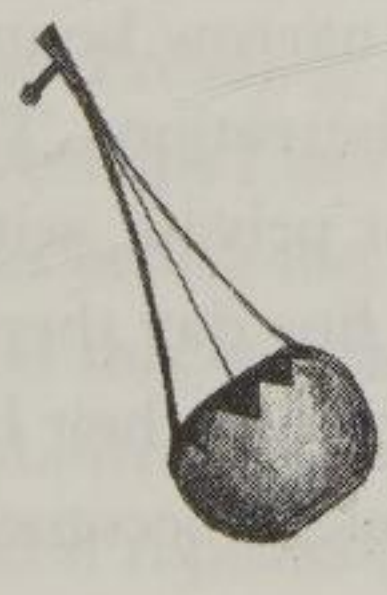
[7] A nirguni poet and disciple of Dadu, *c.* sixteenth–seventeenth centuries.

[8] Ramananda, saint and devotee of Lord Rama, lived during *c.* fifteenth century. Legend has it that he was a disciple of Ramanuja and took Kabir as his disciple. He was revered by a religious community which calls itself Ramanandis.

the entire Brahmin community, Ramananda could aptly declare sohaham....

One day Christ too had similarly said sohaham—I and my Father are one. His love and goodness was extended to all mankind and in the light of such goodness he could see that he was no different from the Universal Man. The Buddha asked his disciples to preach unbounded love and friendship, entirely devoid of any reservations or ill feeling.... Only a man may be given such noble advice because only in him can the idea of sohaham strike deep roots. The Truth that the Buddha perceived in himself and preached was that through love alone does man reveal immeasurable Truth....

In our country, it is often said that the philosophy of sohaham was meant for extraordinary individuals, not the common man. In saying this we have only deprived man of his innate and natural rights. Just as people whom we know as untouchables have for long endured their 'inferior' status, similarly, numerous people unquestionably accept the various disabilities imposed on them. But denying a single individual his glory will amount to denying it for all. He who agrees to have his natural rights curtailed only insults and belittles the God who governs all activities, who is the Eternal Witness to all that occurs and is present in each being....



15.

THE TRUTH OF MAN*

We have three birthplaces, all joined to one another. First, there is the physical world and this world is everywhere inhabited by man. One may find human habitation in the coldest of places, in hot sandy deserts, high and inaccessible mountain ranges, and even in the plains of Bengal. For man, there is really no place out of bounds; the earth has opened up its heart to him.

Second there is the world of memory. This is the world that has been patiently constructed over time by gathering tales about our past and our ancestors. It is like a nest sewn together

by using seams of memory and it relates not to some particular community but the entire mankind. The world of memory unites all peoples. This entire world is man's birthplace and all history, human history.

The third is the world of spirituality which may be called the grand meeting ground of the Human Mind. This is the private world of meditation for every individual. It could be that someone's mind is enclosed by narrow boundaries and those of some others badly affected by aberrations. There is, however, a larger mind that is universal, not private, with which we may become suddenly acquainted. One fine day there is a call from above and men become prepared to give up their lives for the sake of Truth. Even among ordinary people, it becomes quite evident how a man

* *Source*: 'Manav Satya' (The Truth of Man), address delivered at Santiniketan as a sequel to the Kamala Lectures for 1933. Later published in the journal *Probasi*, Baisakh–Jaistha 1340 BS/April–June 1933; reproduced in RR, vol. 10, *Parishista* (Appendix), pp. 653–9.

only harms himself when deluded by self-interest and personal attachments. It is thus that he becomes aware of a part of him that is linked to the Universal Mind.... When someone is about to drown, another man jumps into the water to his rescue. He puts his own life at risk for the sake of another. He who does not think beyond himself is reluctant to take that risk; to stay safe at all costs remains his only objective. However, there could be many who do not take this to be the ideal; for them all human existence is interconnected.

The family into which I was born had adopted for itself a special form of religious life. This was based on the Upanishads, the personal spiritual experiences of my father and that of other spiritual figures. I am the youngest son of my father. All ritual ceremonies in my life were performed in the Vedic way, though also in keeping with the preferences of the Brahmo Samaj. I am the student who ran away from schools; whenever there were boundaries to be respected, my mind would rebel. I would simply refuse to accept anything that was imposed on me. But my father never admonished me for this. He himself was a fiercely independent man, independent enough to give up the habits or customs of his forefathers. I too enjoyed the freedom to reflect upon the deeper questions of life. I must admit that at times, my father would be pained by my rebelliousness. But he never complained.

In my childhood I had memorized several verses of the Upanishads through repeated reading. Not all of it I could accept with my mind and heart. Perhaps I had respect but not the capacity to understand what was before me. And then I was conferred the sacred thread. It was on this occasion that I was asked to formally recite the Gayatri Mantra. I did not simply memorize this particular mantra; I recited it repeatedly with the correct intonation and obtained from my father its true and esoteric meaning. At that time, I was about 12 years old. Whenever I meditated on this mantra I felt as though my own existence was no different from that of this world. 'Bhurbhuvaha swaha': I am at one with the

world and the entire cosmos. He who is behind this universe has also given us the gift of consciousness. I could feel the presence of two streams: my own consciousness and the outer world, the inner and the outer, finally merging together in a common stream.

He whom I have thus experienced through meditation links the World Soul (*Viswa-atma*) to my own through consciousness. The joy of this realization brought luminosity to my mind and this is an experience that I can still recollect.

When I was older, about 18 or 19 years of age, perhaps even 20, I used to live in a house in Chowringhee with my elder brother. Such a brother none but I ever had. He was a friend, brother, and co-worker, all rolled into one. In those days, it was customary to leave bed at dawn. My father himself would be up very early. I recall that once I was with him at the hills of Dalhousie. The place was terribly cold. But I remember how my father would wake me up even on those cold winter mornings with a lamp in his hand. One day, at the break of dawn, I stood on the bal-

cony of our Chowringhee house. There was then, in our vicinity, a school called Free School. Its entrance would be visible just across the street. That morning as I looked at the school, the sun was just beginning to appear from behind the cover of trees. Just as the sun became fully visible, the gates of my mind suddenly swung open. At that point in time, it struck me as though man always had a veil before his eyes. That veil probably constituted his individuality and if ever that individuality were to be erased, fulfilling worldly tasks or functions could prove difficult. On that day, however, the veil before my eyes fell off as the sun made its appearance. It felt as though I was looking at Truth with an open vision. I could now perceive the inner soul of man. Down below, two porters were walking across the street, laughing away with their hands on each other's shoulders. That sight struck me as something extraordinarily beautiful. It did not at all appear as though the two men were ordinary porters. On that day, I could peep into their souls where the Eternal Man was seated.

What may we call beautiful? The beauty that is outwardly visible to us is insignificant; true beauty comes through realizing the inner meaning of an object.... I had a friend who was not particularly known for his wisdom. But allow me to narrate a story that reveals how even such paltry wisdom would come into play. One day he asked me, 'Tell me, have you seen God?' To this I replied that I had not. He then claimed that he had seen God which prompted me to ask how. 'Why! He keeps swarming around my eyes all the time!' he exclaimed. Until that day, I would be irritated by this particular friend's presence. Now I developed a liking for him too. After that day I would invite him often. On reflecting upon what had passed it occurred to me that his crassness was only incidental; it was certainly the highest Truth that he represented. Having realized I began to feel happy in his company. He was no longer just an ordinary man; he and I were integral parts of the same world. On that day, I had the feeling that what I had experienced was true liberation. In that exalted state I remained for four days. In those four days, I could perceive the world as nothing but Truth. And then, brother Jyoti[1] took us to Darjeeling and, once there, the dark veil came back before our eyes.

This, in brief, was my first spiritual experience. My moods or feelings during these days or the days immediately following, are best captured in the poems that I wrote that are now included in the collection *Prabhat Sangit*....[2]

What I narrate above is an account of the days when Light from the Infinite penetrated my darkness. On that day, my consciousness outgrew me and sought refuge in that which we may

[1] Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925), elder brother of Rabindranath. Author and playwright, he started a steamer service and had business interests in indigo and jute. He served as secretary to the Adi Brahmo Samaj between 1869 and 1888 and was a great supporter of female education. He translated Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* into Bengali in 1924.

[2] A collection of songs by Rabindranath first published in 1883.

call the Absolute or Supreme Being. On that day there arose in me the urge to free myself of my inane captivity and merge myself in the varied experiences of life just as a river flows on to meet the ocean. That urge I now associate with my discovery of Man. It is through this Man that rivers or streams will journey towards the ocean but carry along in its flow, every single being. Wherefrom came that call, which, once awakened by the rising sun, created the great urge in me? This was a call from the great Ocean where everything must eventually meet, meandering their course through all humanity, through worldly indulgence and renunciation, not rejecting anything but gathering all feelings and sentiments as these went along....

Eventually, there grew in me the urge to make this journey myself. This, in brief, is the backdrop to my lecture on 'The Religion of Man'.[3] That Ocean I have renamed 'Man' who is established in the heart of every human being, representing all his past and future....

Whatever occurs ultimately unites in Man but also comes back to us, echoing various moods and aesthetic feeling. All this has been a matter of experience for me, not some philosophical discourse....

The lecture that I delivered at Oxford developed out of my consciously articulated thought. The substance of that lecture I first detached from my intimate experiences and then, adding to it some other philosophical material, I placed it upon reasoned argument. But the inception of the idea occurred the way I have described it. At the time the experience first came to me, I found the world revealed as Truth and exceptional Beauty. There was no room for any doubt here, for that which I had perceived I knew to be independently true. There is still the hope in me that at some auspicious moment, I shall once again fully get to see this

[3] Hibbert Lectures for 1930, delivered at Manchester College, Oxford on 19, 21, and 26 May, published in 1931.

world as the abode of Bliss. Ever since this vision came to me in my childhood, the Upanishadic message *anandarupam yadvibhati*[4] would come repeatedly to my lips. When I underwent that spiritual experience, I could realize that this world was by no means gross and that there was simply no worldly object that had not been touched by some aesthetic joy (rasa).... That which is gross may perish one day, the Joyous Bliss that is so dear to us can never suffer death....

Whenever I came to Sajadpur, I could behold enchanting scenes from village life and rural work cycles. Such scenes I have captured in my stories such as *Postmaster*, *Samapti*, and *Chuti*....[5] Of the time that I spent at Sajadpur I recall one particular day. That day, with the coming of the tide, water filled up the once dry creeks and canals. The rafts that were once half sunk in mud now began to float. The village boys were playfully excited on hearing the sound of onrushing water; some of them kept diving into the water repeatedly.

That day, standing on my balcony, I watched the bellowing monsoon clouds in the sky laden with water, and down below, the lively playfulness of the village boys. And then suddenly, my mind stepped out in the open, going far out. Inside me, there developed an intimate feeling; before me, I perceived the eternal and uninterrupted flow of all existence, the enactment of a Divine Play that had subsumed within itself the variety and vicissitudes of everyday lives. All that I had so far personally experienced in life as also the life histories of every other being around me I found to be sucked into this grand vision. There was a variety of human drama being enacted everywhere around me, feelings of happiness and unhappiness expressed by various characters, and yet all this seemed to be bound together by a common aesthetic feeling

[4] *Mundaka Upanishad*, II.2:8.

[5] Short stories, written between 1891 and 1893 and now included in the collection, *Galpaguccha*.

and witnessed by a Grand Beholder who could witness all. That Beholder I found standing beside me, witnessing my own feelings that had troubled me so far.

In this way when my little self was established in the Great One, the entire burden of my personal existence became lesser. I could now perceive the unfolding to aesthetic joy and feeling that I could now share with the aesthete (*rasika*). That feeling I found to be strange and deeply stirring even to myself.

In all this, I sensed a feeling of release and freedom. That day, I also realized that there were two ways in which we gathered experience. There was one part that I called 'me' and closely wound up with that was my family, my country, my personal wealth, and fame, matters that I worried about and for which I was prepared to risk animosity and ill-will. But there was also the other side where there was only He who filled the world and also transcended it.... It is not as though I can unite these two sides to my existence. When detached from Him, I continue to be

affected by feelings of happiness and unhappiness. In this state, I fail to see the grand harmony that He has brought about in this world. There are moments, however, when my eyes turn to Him and that is when I begin to sense freedom and liberation. Only when the human ego overcomes its solitary existence that it perceives Truth. Such experiences of mine have found expression in my poetry which I have classed under 'Lord of My Life' (Jeebondebata):

> O Beloved!
> Does all your longing end
> Once you enter my heart?[6]

I have called Him my own to the extent that I am Complete and Universal; to that extent I am also united with Him. It is

[6] Verses from the anthology *Chitra* (1896) in my translation. Tagore's own rendering of these lines occur in 'The Religion of Man' (1931).

hence that I ask, 'O Lord! Are you happy to see your Divine Play manifest in me?'

The Lord of the Universe (Viswadebata) is seated astride several worlds, in the stars and planets. The Lord of my Life (Jeebondebata) is especially manifest in my life; the human heart is His holy site and the centre of all experience. The Baul singer has called him Maner Manush (Man of my Heart). In my lectures on the 'Religion of Man' I have tried to speak of this Jeebondebata who belongs to all humanity. These lectures have been born of my innermost experiences as a poet; it would be a mistake to call them philosophical in nature. This intimate feeling has been flowing inside me for a long time. If it is taken to be a distinctive quality of my mind or nature, I will have to accept it as such.

In our tradition, it has been recommended that in order to experience God, it is necessary to go outside human society, seek refuge in some remote cave, to obliterate oneself, and be lost in the Limitless. I have no right to comment one way or another on that particular tradition. The tradition that I accept is that which recommends that rather than renounce all, one should try to experience God within oneself. He is the Universal Soul. I have not the capacity to understand the view which speaks of arriving at Transcendental truth by transcending God Himself. This is simply because my intelligence is human intelligence, my heart a human heart, my imagination the imagination of a man. No matter how much I try to purify these, they still remain anchored in human existence.... If man's salvation comes only through self-annihilation, why was I born a man?

There was a time when I meditated on our ancient mantras in a self-deprecating mood. It is not as though I attempted to run away from this world or attained peace at heart. It would have only been too easy to overcome a sense of rebellion. In a similar way, I have gained comfort at times of suffering and rescued myself from temptations. And then came a time when I acknowledged all, accepted all. I could then clearly perceive that I was very

much a part of the Divine Play that was being constantly enacted on the world stage. I could see all things thickly enmeshed with one another. Such a vision I cannot call petty or insignificant. This too is true. When we see our lives being detached from Jeebondebata, we only bring suffering upon ourselves. Liberation comes to us when the two are joined....

III

LETTERS

1.

RELIGION DOES NOT HAVE TO BE BORING DISCOURSE*

... The other day, the minister[1] who had conducted the service at the Samaj, delivered such a long sermon that members of the audience completely lost their patience. Sitting through such long-winded religious discourses, the mind becomes so bewildered that it begins to produce results that are quite the opposite of what is expected. Frankly, one would be happier sitting at home, playing a game of cards or chess! This is precisely why I am so loath to attending the weekly services of the Brahmo Samaj. To everything there has to be a good side and the bad, as also the question of who is qualified to do something and who is not. It cannot be expected of a man to sit through and silently suffer whatever another man had decided to sermonize upon and regardless of the quality thereof. On the contrary, such practices, when thoughtlessly enforced, will lead to great unhappiness and

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Cuttack, 27 February 1893; reproduced in *Chinnapotraboli* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960), p. 1. Indira Devi Chaudhurani (1870–1960) was the daughter of Satyendranath Tagore and Gyanadanandini, Rabindranath's niece.

[1] The reference is to one Madhusudana Rao at Cuttack.

revulsion.... Surely, there has to be some equation between the subject and the qualities of the speaker; the more daunting the subject, the greater has to be the competence of the speaker. These days, unfortunately, religious services have been entrusted to people quite unfit to carry these out satisfactorily. This grows from the belief that religious merit accrues from merely listening to a sermon.... I personally find this grossly unjust.... In truth, most people unwittingly harbour in themselves what George Eliot calls 'other-worldliness'. They believe that time spent in religious discourses is good investment from which they will continue to derive profits in the future! My own feeling in the matter is that there is a great loss in hearing higher and sublime things being narrated in a commonplace fashion....

2.

FACING THIS WORLD WITH LOVE AND FORTITUDE*

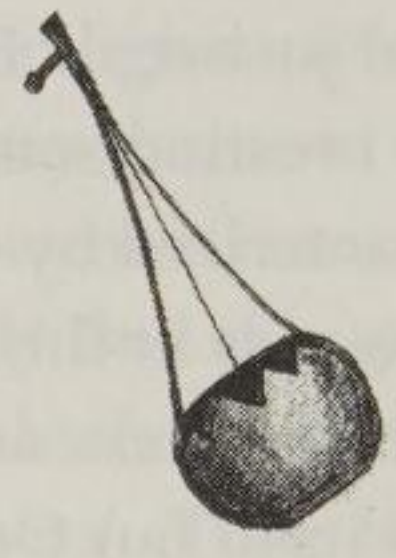
... In the working of nature, there would have to be a place which we assign to compassion or how else did we come upon

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Indira Devi Chaudhurani, 4 July 1893; reproduced in *Chinnapotraboli*, p. 220.

it? It may be difficult to ascertain just where this is located.... You might say that if man was naturally gifted with intelligence, he would know that in this world there have to be matters such as compassion and natural justice.... But all this argument and counter-argument is only creating some fuss since this world as a creation cannot be characterized by unqualified happiness. So long as there is incompleteness in this world, there will remain some room for human unhappiness and suffering. Only if this world were not the world itself but God, would it remain without a blemish....

If you think hard, your thoughts will return to the basic question: why was the world at all created? And if we have no objections to creation itself, why complain about suffering? Hence, the Buddhists want to strike at the very root of the question: they argue that as long as there is existence, there can be no way to overcome suffering. The Christians too have high praise for suffering: in their view, God Himself appeared as man to take upon himself all the pain and suffering of mankind. Perhaps that is some matter of consolation. All the same, moral anguish has to be set aside from the distress caused by a crop ready to be harvested going under water. The latter caused material anguish, not moral. But suppose we were to say, 'Whatever was to happen has happened. Here I am and before me is this wonderful world. Let us save it at all costs.' To this the Buddha would have said, 'If you wish to keep this world going, you must be prepared to bear unhappiness and suffering.' 'To protect that which is good and an object of desire, we will put up with every suffering if we have to,' I would have finally countered. It is of course to be assumed that every now and then we will have to withstand starvation and mental anguish. If our love for this world can overlook the suffering that it bring us and if, for the sake of our continued worldly existence, we are willing to bear

all pain and suffering, then it does not behove us to complain anymore....



3.

MY UNDERSTANDING OF VEDANTA*

... Upon studying the Vedanta, most people begin to believe that all their doubts about the world and its origin have been cleared away. Even an intellectual giant such as Rammohun Roy was a follower of Vedanta and Paul Deussen had high praise for it. Even so, I continue to nurture some doubts on this matter. In one sense, when compared to other philosophical schools of thought, Vedanta looks simple but this is only because handling 'one' is simpler than handling 'two'. Vedanta speaks only of a single order of Reality, not some permanent divide between creation and the Creator. Prima facie, these two terms may look quite natural and intelligible; in truth, however, there is no greater problem posed

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Selaidaha, 19 August 1894; reproduced in *Chinnapotraboli*, p. 317.

before the human mind than defining the relationship between the two. Vedanta, by severing the Gordian knot has reduced two into one. If anything, this is also reducing the problem by half! It is indeed a matter of wonder to me that man should even contemplate the possibility of there being no ultimate substance to creation or that nothing else existed apart from Brahman. The greater wonder though is that such opinion is not as strange as it appears to be. In truth, it is extremely difficult to prove that something at all exists! This philosophy of Vedanta is now fast spreading in Europe too but it is doubtful if it will find favourable roots there....

These days, on moonlit nights, when I recline on my chair placed on my boat with half-closed eyes and my legs stretched out, and when a gentle breeze caresses my feverish forehead, the water around me, the land, the rippling river ... and at some distance, the sight of sleeping villages partially covered by trees, appear to me like some shadow, perhaps like Maya of the Vedanta itself. And yet, this Maya, more truth-like in its quality than Truth itself, engrosses my mind. And at that point in time, the thought never crosses my mind that freeing oneself from the effects of Maya is liberation itself....

4.

RELIGION IN NATURE*

... My religion is natural religion and the method of worship I employ is worship of nature. Yesterday, I glanced upon a mother goat reclining with a lazy elegance on a grassy patch by the roadside. Seated next to it was the kid in a state of deep repose. On viewing this, there arose in me a feeling that was deep-seated, wondrous, and aesthetically fulfilling. I give this very feeling of mine the name of religion. The moment I set my sight on such evocative objects, I begin to feel welling up inside me all the love and natural contentment that there is in this world. Other than this, I do not busy myself with any dogma of which in any case I know very little. I have little understanding of any dogma and foresee little possibility of understanding these either in the time to come. That which I can positively relate to and understand is good enough for me, for that by itself provides me the fullest happiness. By trying to superimpose upon this any false speculation and then to construct all this into a system jeopardizes the Truth of it all. I know only this: that there is a sense of deep Contentment and Love that fills this world. More than that I need not know....

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Indira Devi Chaudhurani, 11 February 1895; reproduced in *Chinnapotraboli*, p. 399.

5.

THE ESSENCE OF VAISHNAVISM*

... Let me briefly state the essence of Vaishnavism as I understand it. Most religions lay down instructions on how to approach God within a structured relationship. He is the father and that makes me His son who must show respect and obedience. He is omnipotent and I, a man with limited powers; that makes Him an object of reverence. He brings goodness and well-being on this earth and since I benefit from this benediction, I have reason to be grateful to Him. At lower levels of religious conception, God assumes the form of the Terrible and I remain terrified. He is the generous donor who can give away anything at will and I am the sinner who is apt to sing songs in His praise so that I too may be redeemed by His grace.

In Vaishnavism, however, there is an attempt to go beyond such predetermined structures and to strike a relationship with God that is not founded on some special cause (ahetuki). I do not quite know why it is that I yearn for Him so much; all that I realize is that I simply cannot do without Him. There is nothing else that can give me greater pleasure or satisfaction.

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 9 Aghrayan 1302 BS/November 1895; reproduced in *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Dharmachinta*, ed. and compiled by Satyendranayth Roy, 2nd reprint (Calcutta: Granthalay, 2007), pp. 26–7. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay (1892–1985) is best known as the first major biographer of Rabindranath Tagore. This four-volume biography took 25 years to complete (1929–54). Rabindranath could personally read only the first of these volumes.

It is for this reason that Vaishnav poets have pined for that love for which there is no apparent cause or explanation. They seek love that transgresses the structures of everyday life and are willing to surrender itself in complete abandon. It is this love that Vaishnav poets have used as an ideal allegory for the love that draws the human soul (atma) to the Divine (paramatma). In our everyday lives, we remain tightly bound by worldly ties but fail to find happiness or contentment in them. Whenever the distant flute of the Divine strikes a note, we grow eager and ecstatic and prepare to cross worldly boundaries in search of fulsome Beauty and Love.

Who created this yearning and perennial sense of discontentment in us? Why is this at all required? From the perspective of Vaishnavism, these are not ordinary human requirements. The underlying essence of what Vaishnavism tries to say is the following: He (God) requires me just as much as I require Him. It is because He simply cannot do without me that He draws me so powerfully to His presence. It is thus that the Divine flute keeps calling my name so enchantingly. It is thus that the sky above me is so bewitchingly blue, the autumn moon so alluring, and the garden at spring time so attractive. It is thus that in the smile of the beloved we catch a glimpse of heaven and our affection knows no bounds when a child breaks out into laughter. All beautiful things take me away from myself and bring me closer to my dearest friend who sits with a smile on his face. No matter who I love on this earth, I love Him. The essence of all our love and affection amounts to our realizing God within us in some degree, whether consciously or unconsciously.... Bliss and contentment is to be found nowhere apart from Him. He manifests this Bliss everywhere, in water, on land, in the sky, in flowers, fruits, and edible grains; in father, son, and brother; in wife, daughter, and mother. Truly, that which is dear to me is my God, the object of

my adoration. The worship that we render in our temples and in keeping with prescribed ways is the worship rendered only to an inert and lifeless image.

On the whole, my God is seated where all that is beautiful and dear to me is located. It is from there that he beckons me and it is there that I ultimately unite with Him. Where God is seen as the Infinite, I become only a finite being; where He is seen as the Creator, I am seen only as the created; where He is omnipotent and Almighty, I am only petty and powerless. Through such conceptions, it is impossible for me to draw closer to Him. It is only when He, for my own sake, begins to reveal Himself as the Beautiful, the Beloved, as my friend and lover that I become His equal and He gives Himself up to me. It is at that point that He, renouncing the splendour of his kingdom at Mathura, assumes the form of the enchanting cowherd of Vrindavana with the magical flute in His hands.

If you begin reading Vaishnav lyrics without daring to go beyond established social conventions, your mind will only revolt at every step. Their simple yet profound meaning will give you great happiness only when you are able to transport yourself outside all unnatural social conventions and boundaries created by man and relate to them with the innocence of a newly born child....

6.
JEEBONDEBATA*

... Deep inside me there lies a gigantic and an old 'I', He who especially is the Lord of my life (Jeebondebata). It is His solemn and stealthy appearance that makes my soul approach the Divine. Though belonging to a supra-natural world, He rules my life in the natural world. It is He who constantly tries to impart meaning and fulfilment to my life. He never deserts me even though He is only intermittently successful in what He does. It is through His mediation that I am able to relate to God; it is He who brings me God's message, His command and

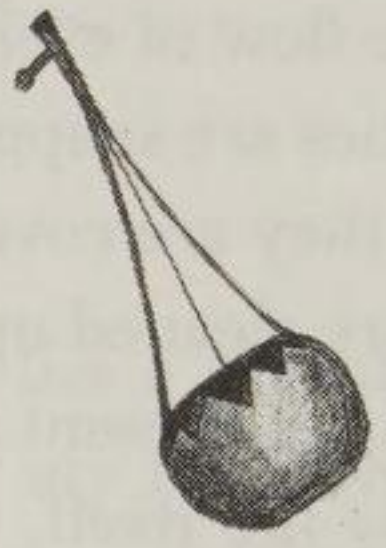
His joy; it is by His incessant effort that my sins (pap) are purified by fire and my virtues (punya) made more luminous. It is in developing me and my being that He finds fulfilment. It is His Will and Power that directs me to the path of auspiciousness and it is this auspiciousness that adds to His own strength. Hidden behind my outer consciousness, He continues to work away like a housewife, constantly managing her household provisions. It is only upon uniting with Him through the bonds of love and in thus fulfilling each other that I shall perceive in

* *Source*: Letter by Rabindranath Tagore to Mohit Chandra Sen, dated 17 February 1903. First appeared in *Viswabharati Parika*, Sravan 1349 BS/July–August 1942; reproduced in Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Jeebondebata: Rabindra Rachana Sankalan* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2010), pp. 75–6. Mohit Chandra Sen (1870–1906) was a member of Keshab Chandra's Nababidhan Church and well known for his oratory and as a gifted literary critic.

myself the loving relationship between the supra-natural world and the natural. Once that happens, God can, under no circumstances, be separated from us. In the case of every individual, Jeebondebata seeks to unite man to Viswadebata (the Lord of the Universe) through the flow of events, amidst happiness and sorrow. Sometimes these ties are snapped but attempts are made to revive them. At times, they are covered with dust and grime but over time, these too are cleaned up. It is my wish that with this ever indulgent, eternally present companion of mine, I am united in marriage in this life itself, under the bright rays of the sun, the gentle and fragrant breeze, between the blue sky and the green foliage on earth, and in this thickly populated world with its cacophony of sounds. I wish I get to know my Jeebondebata directly, to submissively place my right hand on his and to go happily where he would take me. Let me not painfully interrupt this Great Journey by putting obstacles on the way....

It was this eternally present companion of mine that even in my juvenile days had acquainted me with my intimate and long-standing relationship with the natural world and it is He again, who in my advanced years, is trying in various ways to explain to me my relationship with God through the travails of life, through joy and grief, through loving union, and the painful parting of ways. The Lord of my life exists. He loves me and it is through this love that I am progressively gaining the love of God. Just as in this worldly life I have gained a father, mother, friend, and the beloved, just as they have led me to God through everyday life, similarly, my companion from the supra-natural world has constructed a bridge that is mysterious and spiritual and which has placed me in an extraordinarily loving relationship with God. I do not quite know if I have been able to explain myself or if, in offering this explanation, I have been drawn into some error. However, such an explanation had been long seeking to reveal

itself in flashy colours, piercing the dark, sombre clouds of my poetry. It is with the intention of catching this light that I have been groping around....



7.

THE CRUDITIES OF IMAGE WORSHIP*

... Though born into a Brahmo family, my mind was never entrapped in some particular method of worship. One reason for that is that even as a child I developed strong poetic instincts. At the time, I would remain absorbed for long hours in my personal world of imagination. As a child, I simply had no understanding of what conventionally was called religion.

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Kadambini Dutta, 20 Ashad 1317 BS/4 July 1910; reproduced in *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960), vol. 7, pp. 27–32. Kadambini Dutta (1878?–1943) was widowed early in life and corresponded with Rabindranath for over 30 years on the subject of religion. She launched an agitation in her native village against animal sacrifice, wrote for a woman's journal, *Antahapur* (founded 1898), and for a time taught at a school founded by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani of the Tagore family.

When I was about 13 or 14 years of age, I began reading Vaishnav poetry with much eagerness and delight: their very rhythm, aesthetic appeal, and language fascinated me.... Based on my reading of Vaishnav poetry and works like the *Chaitanya Mangal*,[1] I studied the life of Chaitanya for a long time and with much enthusiasm. At the time, I was never seriously drawn to the religious discourse of the Brahmo Samaj; in truth, I was quite apathetic to it. That apart, even in my childhood, I was strongly drawn to a sense of patriotism and, hence, always prepared to accept in its true spirit whatever good there was in our traditional culture....

It is for this reason that the Brahmo community of my time did not look upon me favourably and was not quite willing to accept me as a Brahmo....

There comes a stage when man simply cannot do without Truth and at that point in his life, he ceases to delude himself, whether out of some sentimental attachment to his country or some inherited habit and custom.... When we truly begin to seek God, we simply stop playing tricks upon ourselves or upon others. Once I found myself in this situation, I was forced to give up the methods of worship traditionally practised in this country. Whether explicitly or otherwise, my writings based in Santiniketan have constantly given expression to such feelings....

Those among us who defend the worship of images do this on several grounds: some say that given man's limited mental capacity, there is no other way but to fall back on image worship as a practically useful aid. Others argue that especially for men who are mentally inferior or infirm, this is the only available path. For the sake of such people, we are expected to tolerate or put up with such practices. In recent times, some people have also been heard to claim that spiritual life actually finds sublimation

[1] A sixteenth-century hagiography concerning Chaitanya by Jayananda. A work with an identical name is known to have been written by a contemporary, Lochandas.

in the worship of images. It is pointless to argue with such people and their assertions. Rather than produce some good, prolonged debates on this issue are likely to cause some ill will and harm. Hence, it would be prudent to drop it altogether.

All I wish to state here is that only if man was clearer about just what he was seeking when seeking God, a lot of unwanted rubbish would be swept away. More often than not, when seeking God, we only end up in seeking Him the way we are driven to seek commonplace things in our everyday life. Those who cannot overcome the habit of always wanting something or the other have God on their list of coveted items....

Sadly, we tend to seek God just as we seek medical relief in illness and money when in financial distress. I cannot say that this is wholly unreasonable or improper, and yet it occurs to me that this is but a passive method, not an active one. In truth, the spiritual quest for God indicates not so much an effort to obtain Him as to unite with Him.

There is nothing in this world with which we may unite wholly and this may be justly regarded as the cause of our greatest pain and anguish. In our everyday life, any attempt at obtaining such unity remains partial or unfulfilled. The reason for this is that people around us reveal only a part of their selves with which it is impossible to be fully integrated. The husband-like qualities in the husband, the friendly qualities in a friend, and the son-like qualities in a son go only some distance and then they cease to move forward. It is for this reason that the human soul fails to fully discover itself in them. By comparison, He (God) fully combines in Himself the nature or the properties of the father, mother, husband, and friend. It is thus that He is able to unite in Himself our bodies, minds, and souls without any obstacles whatsoever....

In this country, God has never been simply an image. In other words, it is not as though people of this country have always

given expression to their religious feeling outside themselves. Gods that are conceived or crafted as images are strongly bound up in their personal histories: they are born and they die, they marry and beget children, and are visibly affected by feelings of anger and jealousy. Surely, we abuse our own intelligence when taking such histories to be credible. Such conceptions of Divinity, it must be further noted, conditioned as these are by categories of time and space, amounts to denying the Universal God.

Religion comes to the aid of those who are able to evolve a higher conception of religion. The Hindus, regrettably, have not always been able to achieve this. On the contrary, they have claimed that common people deserve a religion that is both crude and commonplace.... All the same, the standards of our spiritual life cannot be lowered any further. Henceforth, our imagination, mind, heart, and action must all be directed towards attaining liberation. I desire such liberation both for myself and for my countrymen. However, let us not be led into thinking that this may be achieved through mere knowledge or else by love alone. Let us not presume that love cannot be born outside image worship. If only we were to examine the ecstatic love of the sufis,[2] we will discover how wonderfully they are able to join pure knowledge of the Supreme with boundless love....

[2] Practitioners of an inner, mystical dimension within Islam, sufis strongly adhere to the values of peace, brotherhood, and non-violence.

8.

RELIGION AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS*

... There are two religious communities in this world which are most virulently opposed to other communities. These are the Christians and the Muslims. These two communities do not rest content with practising their own religion, they are also out to destroy others. Hence, there is no other way to unite with them other than through converting to their religion. With respect to Christians, there appears to be one redeeming quality. They are the harbingers of modernity and not cast in some medieval anachronism. It is not simply religion that informs their life and

they do not keep the faithful strictly bounded by faith. Also, the words 'European' and 'Christian' are not synonymous. There is no anachronism in coining such terms as 'European Buddhist' or 'European Muslim'. On the other hand, a community that takes its very name from religion considers religion to be its primal source of identity. Quite naturally, the expressions 'Muslim Buddhist' and 'Muslim Christian' would be meaningless. The Hindus too are similar to Muslims in this respect; the only difference between the two being that for the former, active hostility towards other religions is not a sacred duty. Rather, the Hindus prefer to extend to other religions the spirit of non-violent, non-cooperation. But

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Kalidas Nag, 21 June 1922; reproduced in *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1986), vol. 12, pp. 286–8. Kalidas Nag (1891–1966) was a close friend of Tagore and travelled with him to China in 1924.

it is because Hinduism is essentially determined by birth and conformity to customs that the walls it has constructed around it appear more forbidding.... Muslims do not shun people of other religious communities on grounds of differing customary practices; the Hindu is careful even there. During the Khilafat[1] agitation, the Hindus have not been able to draw as close to the Muslims as Muslims to Hindus. Our everyday habits or practices constitute the bridges of understanding between various communities and here, unfortunately, the Hindu has created obstacles at practically every step. When I first visited our family estates, I noticed that at the estate office, Muslims would not be allowed to sit on the mats laid out on the floor; they were required to lift the mats before they took their seats. Nothing can be more damaging to harmonious relations between two communities than if one considered the manners or customs of another to be improper or impure....

India's ill fortune rests on the following facts: for the Hindu, differences of custom matter more than differences in doctrine; for the Muslim, the opposite is true. Where the Muslim keeps his doors open, the Hindu keeps it shut. How, then, will these two communities ever meet? ...

[1] A pan-Islamic movement launched in India by Indian Muslims with support from Hindus and the Congress to protest against the dismemberment of Turkey in the aftermath of the First World War.

9.

THE RELIGION OF MY FATHER*

... The day Ramakrishna Paramahamsa[1] called on my father, I was present at home but not at the place where the two met. Many years later, going by Nivedita's[2] facial expression, I could tell that the meeting had not gone off well. It is not at all improbable that my father did not pay due respect to the Paramahamsa. This is because he was strongly opposed to the worship of images (with which the Paramahamsa was so intimately associated) and in keeping with the spirit of the Upanishads, his life-long spiritual practices were characterized by a serene self-control. The feelings of rapturous love and devotion he derived solely from

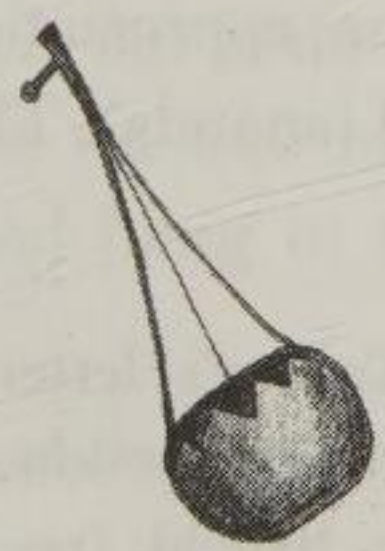
* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Ramananda Chatterjee, 21 November 1929; reproduced in *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1986), vol. 12, p. 127. Ramananda Chatterjee (1865–1943) was a well-known educationist and journalist. Chatterjee accepted Brahmoism in 1881 and successfully ran two journals, *Probasi* (1901) and *The Modern Review* (1907). He was elected president of the Brahmo Samaj in 1922. In 1926, he toured Europe at the invitation of the League of Nations.

[1] Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), the famed Bengali mystic whose preaching and parables deeply impressed genteel society in late nineteenth century Calcutta, was a worshipper of Kali and served as a priest to the goddess at Dakshineswar.

[2] Sister Nivedita (1867–1911), born Margaret Noble, was the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She was actively associated with nationalist politics and was a close friend to many in the Tagore family.

Persian sufi poetry;[3] casting aside the display of high emotion that is known to our Sakta and Vaishnav traditions. However, this did not arise in some aristocratic disdain that he exhibited for our popular religious sentiments but because he refused to consider as pure or spiritually instructive the worship of images and the fanciful tales about our gods that went together with this....

With respect to religious life, he retained a strong sense of purity and decorum. Such qualities came in the way of his accepting even the broad tenets of Christianity. Rammohun Roy too had a deep commitment to monotheistic worship and it is for that reason that his countrymen have still not fully accepted him. My father inherited the pure monotheism of Rammohun, even as a child. Hereafter, his mind revolted whenever he came into contact with people who were habitually associated with image worship. Keshab Chandra (Sen) entered the Brahmo Samaj through the gates of Christianity and hence never came to possess that equanimity and serene self-control that my father possessed. It was easier for him to appropriate the emotional ecstasy that characterized Sakta and Vaishnav religious traditions and to wholly immerse himself in these movements....



[3] Chiefly from the poetry of Hafez, a fourteenth-century Persian poet.

10.

RELIGION AS THE LOVE AND SERVICE OF MAN*

... In your letter there is a faint suggestion that my religious life revolves around an Absolute that is without any qualities (nirguna, niranjana). From a certain perspective, this may well be true. Why cannot I experience He who is in every sense Complete even within a vast emptiness? But my mind is willing to accept also its very opposite. My spiritual life would not find fulfilment until I acknowledge He who permeates everything that is there in this world and yet transcends these....

Actually, there is something that I can never bring myself to do; I cannot keep deluding myself in the manner of a child habituated to play with toys in a playhouse. This is what a child-bride is more apt to do. Even with the husband seated beside her, the bride turns her back to him and starts playing with her toys. This is a gross denial of our true spiritual experiences. You may always gift flowers but such gifts are best made to those who truly appreciate them. And such true appreciation eventually sublimates itself into the Bliss of God (ananda). The Vaishnav woman I met

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 29 Chaitra 1337 BS/12 April 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, eds Kanai Samanta and Sanat Kumar Bagchi (revised and enlarged edition) (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1997), vol. 9, pp. 2–5. Hemantabala Devi (1894–1976) was the daughter of Birendrakishor Roychaudhuri of Gauripur, Mysmensing, a close friend of the Tagore family. A selection of her works is now available as *Hemantabala Devir Rachana Sankalan*, eds Jasodhara Bagchi and Abhijit Sen (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur, 1992).

at Selaidaha[1] gifted me a mango and said, 'This is my gift to Him.' This is true giving for it is through me that God will savour the mango. Every morning a priest in the neighbourhood would vigorously shake the flowering *champa* tree so that he may have enough flowers to carry to the house of worship. I often felt the urge to lodge a complaint against him with the police, for each time he did this it was God that he denied and deceived. When God allows flowers to bloom, it is to appreciate their fragrance or beauty through the eyes of man. The priest also denies the world by offering flowers stolen from nature. It is through our juvenile playfulness that we similarly deny and deceive people around us. Offerings of flowers made to gods in places of worship take away from Him the real offerings that would have otherwise pleased Him.

From what I say you will no doubt gather that my God does not exist outside of man. It would be unfair to say that I deliberately stay away from temples or other places of ceremonial worship because the nirguna and niranjana[2] are being slighted; my complaint, rather, is that man himself is being slighted and deceived.

True spirituality which is realized through love and service of man is being diluted through our false play. This would explain why in our country it is in religion that the true worth of man is most neglected. We simply fail to do away with human illness, misery, and hunger because we seek to address these problems in the wrong way. My head hung in shame when at Madura[3]

[1] Now in Bangladesh and at that time a part of the Tagore family estates.

[2] 'Niranjana' literally means untainted and is an expression used to represent the blemishless and immutable Brahman or Absolute. It is an expression also widely used by *bairagis* and yogis. Sikhs prefix the word with 'alakh' suggesting the 'ineffable'.

[3] The reference is to the Meenakshi Amman temple, dedicated to the goddess Parvati, consort of Siva.

temple-priests proudly displayed jewellery worth lakhs and lakhs of rupees belonging to the gods. I wondered then how much human poverty, ignorance, and sickliness had come to be concentrated in such jewellery. While our temple gods are so crassly heaped in wealth and splendour, the real god wanders around outside the temple, piteously extending his frail arms, seeking charity. Will you still mind my worshipping the niranjana? Have you ever wondered into which fathomless pit offerings made to the Lord have fallen while the pangs of hunger in men have only become more intense?

You might of course say that playful worship, such as I have described, is easier to perform. My plea here is not to dilute or oversimplify the human quest for Truth. As men, we only lose our self-esteem if true worship is so thoughtlessly substituted by the false. The worship of the Real has always to travel on the road of human pain and unhappiness but be ready to invoke God even when the cumulative weight of such misery assumes the size of a gigantic mountain. Do not hide yourself in some dark hole of delusion only to escape this daunting spiritual challenge. It is because I love man that I am drawn to quarrelling with the god of your juvenile playhouse....

11.

MUST RELIGIOUS FEELINGS BE EXPRESSED THROUGH SYMBOLS?*

... That which your nature has led to you to experience is not comparable to my own experiences. Hence, I can never say that I shall be offended if you choose to disagree with me. Making unreasonable demands on people is completely alien to my nature. No doubt I cannot accept the injustice and tyranny that is being perpetrated in the name of religion; on the other hand, it would be quite unreasonable of me to protest especially when my own life and experiences are not being adversely affected in any way.

Let me say—and here I speak only for myself—that my mind is incapable of accepting spiritual life contingent on some symbol. It might occur to you that this is quite contrary to my poetic self. Indeed, in my line of work, I have often had to give some symbolic form to my thoughts or feeling. Often, it was in such creations that my aesthetic fulfilment came to rest. But there are occasions when spontaneous feelings take precedence over measured self-expression. In such instances, feeling does not have to seek some form outside itself; rather, it creates its own symbolism and then, having discarded it, seeks yet another form. However, my meditative self fails to seek out such forms as are intensely religious. There is not the image alone but also bizarre stories associated with these images to which we are forced to give the name of

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 10 Baisakh 1338 BS/23 April 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 12–14.

allegory. At times, the sheer force of habit makes us accept these even when they are repulsive in certain aspects. You might of course argue that as God's potentialities are unlimited, it should be possible to associate Him with all sorts of images or tales. In a sense this is true since this world has within it both good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly. We might be accused of limiting the Limitless in some way if we were to associate God only with the good and the beautiful. The thugs considered killing a virtuous act and since God does choose to annihilate men in various ways, why not worship a murderous God?

My God, however, is made up of the best in man. He resides in the heaven created by man himself. Man has created hell too; therein lies all pain, ignorance, and falsehood. This hell, however, is also a negative conception; it keeps denying the positive but fails to obliterate it. This is why I am not prepared to accept the argument that we may ascribe anything to God just because He happens to be limitless....

Perhaps we may say that there are two kinds of mentalities: one which has to depend on symbols and another which does not. There have been several religious men who began by resorting to some symbol but eventually outgrew these. And there were others as, for example, Kabir, Dadu, and Nanak, who even amidst popular symbolism realized Truth purely by meditating on themselves. For them, there could have been no other path.

I do not consider the guru to be a mediating symbol. All I know is that God directly manifests himself where man achieves true fulfilment....

12.
THE GOD OF MY HEART*

.... In the account of your daily worship that you have sent me, I see visible signs of femininity. You belong to the class of mothers and it is but natural that you should be drawn to strong motherly feelings of affection and concern for others. Apparently, you derive great happiness and satisfaction from feeding, washing, and dressing people around you.... To have god leave his bed early in the morning, to feed him on time with great care are acts that are not natural to me. On the other hand, these are very much in keeping with the natural instincts of a woman; through the performance of such acts she realizes her true nature. It is not as though I am unaffected by empathy and concern for others but, in my case, such feelings are directed at their proper place. It is quite unlikely that I shall derive personal satisfaction by employing the same methods as you do. My God resides neither in the temple nor some image or even the heavenly abode of Lord Vishnu (*vaikuntha*). Rather, he resides in man who is visibly affected by hunger, thirst, or the lack of sleep. The god who resides in heaven knows nothing of these men. Florence Nightingale[1] nursed those wounded in the battlefield;

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 31 Jaistha 1338 BS/14 June 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, p. 39.

[1] Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) was a celebrated English reformer and founder of modern nursing. She opened the first nursing school at St Thomas Hospital, London. The battle referred to here is the Battle of Crimea (1853–6).

it was through such humanitarian work that her womanly virtues were realized. Truly great men offer their lives in the service of fellow men who often have to go without food, water, or are overwhelmed by pain and sorrow. It is in such men that they seek God. Their service is not affected by some wanton display of emotion; rather, they render it only nobler through their intelligence, activism, and renunciation. Those who deny the presence of God in man end up denying themselves. Wherever this happens, men remain greatly neglected and the country, as a whole, burdened as it is by collective poverty and misery, lags behind other nations of the world....

It is not my intention to discourage you through such talk. However, I do lose my patience when I find the god of the temple in competition with the God who resides in men. When touring Gaya, I noticed how a wealthy woman from western India deposited a heap of precious coins at the feet of the local religious guide (*panda*): coins that came to be minted by snatching away food from hungry men. Sadly, such generous donors are reluctant to contribute towards mass education or bringing medical relief to their countrymen; little do they realize that the pious offerings that they make to their gods are all in vain. In no other country will you find such lack of interest or apathy in one man about another....

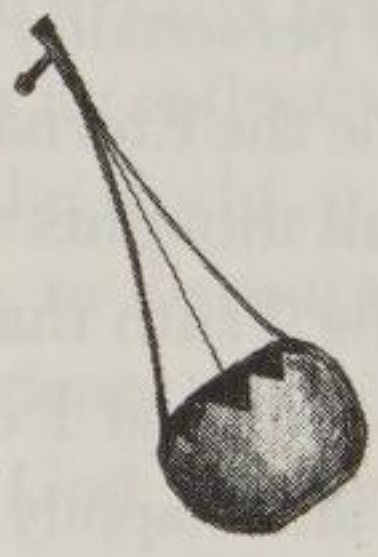
13.
THE RIGHT WAY TO REALIZE GOD*

... Do not be misled into thinking that my spiritual objective is to focus on some particular personality through my meditation. I only try to realize within me the Eternal and Universal Man. It is in Him that I wish to rest all thoughts about myself and personal happiness, to experience the Truth that manifests itself through knowledge, love, and activism that I can generate. In this way, I transcend my little self and happily approach my larger self. Thereby, I also savour Immortality (amrita). It is in the light of these experiences that my worship and my service find their true potential and I overcome all sense of conceit. Human activities may actually be binding unless joined to such liberating experiences. In Europe, there are many atheists, who, by realizing the idea of the Universal Man, render their work glorious. Their concern is for all times and for people of all countries. Those who are obsessed with the need for ritual correctness end up venerating only themselves. The purity they thus acquire is purely personal and any aesthetic enjoyment they experience remains similarly limited. And if there is something called liberation that they seek, that too is viewed as some material investment! What, if anything, do the gods receive from them but for offerings of some rice and bananas, the blowing of conch shells and the ringing of bells, some flowers, leaves, and burning incense?

What I say here does not represent the views of the Brahmo Samaj or, for that matter, any other sect. Nor are these words

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, Darjeeling, 27 June 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 52–8.

borrowed from the West. When I convey my thoughts to Europeans, they do not comprehend me and my own countrymen comprehend me even less. He whom I so anxiously seek, the Man of my Heart, I share with all other men. He is unaffected by any sense of pride that I may take in my country or my own people. If, for my views, I am despised by my own people and become an eyesore for the *sanatanists*,[1] then such matters I must bear with grace....



[1] A sanatanist, generally speaking, is an orthodox Hindu who does not take an historical view of religion; 'sanatan dharma' translates as timeless and immutable religion.

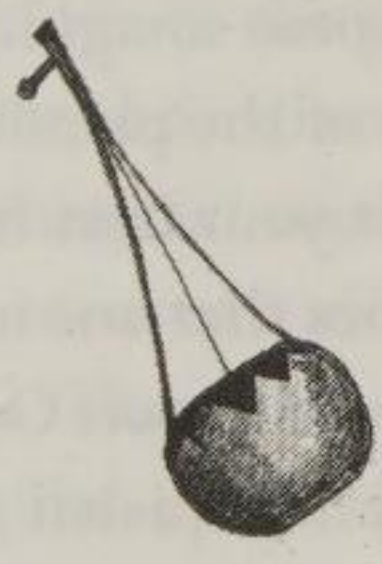
14.

DHARMA*

... Something which your reasoning or instinct has not accepted can never be truly yours. What I wish to convey is that you

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, Darjeeling, 9 Kartik 1338 BS/20 October 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*,

should always carefully deliberate on matters, taking care to remember that the nature (dharma) of man is being human (*manushatva*). This is like saying that the nature of fire is heat or that of animals, bestiality. Man's dharma is realized in self-fulfilment. At times we reduce the wholeness of dharma into fragments. However, by giving these very fragments the name of dharma, we only weaken humanity. In this world, worse things have happened in the name of religion (dharma) than that produced by material greed. And even when religious passion is not used to create a stir, blind faith turns a man inert and lifeless. We subject man's mind and intelligence to meaningless ideas or habits; we make him weak and powerless in relation to his own life and by placing many imaginary obstacles on his path, we render him useless and unfit for any public spirited work....



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vol. 9, pp. 106–8. Contrary to general perception, dharma does not always translate as 'religion'. Its original meaning signifies duty which, again, can be taken to be the intrinsic property or quality of something or somebody. Hence, the dharma of fire is heat and that of the woman (*stri dharma*), fidelity to the husband. This would apply to castes as well. In 1888, Bankimchandra quite uncharacteristically used the term normatively and also in the sense of a religion. The latter is now the popular understanding of the term.

15.
ASTROLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF RELIGION*

... You have taken offence at my ridiculing your faith in planets and other heavenly bodies. This has led you to believe that I have forsaken Hinduism itself. The difficulty here is that if we are to accept everything that lies under the sky, then it becomes impossible to be judicious. The Upanishads say that the Lord is also my friend. I do not know if you regard the Upanishads to be sufficiently Hindu in character. Personally, I see them as the basis of all religions. The Upanishads call God our friend but also the Ruler of our lives. Citing some imaginary sage called Bhrigu,[1] if

you claim that the location of the planet Jupiter in the fifth house of your natal chart makes it your best friend and that the numerous stars and heavenly bodies that one may see in the sky regulate our lives, then who am I to call upon God? ...

You believe that I may be misled by some evil conspiracy hatched in the remote sky and this you consider to be the malefic effects of some planet. Now if this were true, then one man accidentally injuring another at the time of an earthquake should also be explained in this light! If Hinduism tells us that our wrong doings emanate in a source outside us and that we may wash away all our sins by sumptuously feeding the Brahmin or bathe in the Ganga at some auspicious hour, I would have to call this

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, Darjeeling, 8 November 1931; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 116–20.

[1] Bhrigu is considered the doyen of Hindu astrology; the *Bhrigu Samhita*, in all probability a late medieval work, is considered an important astrological text.

unjust and even opposed to religion or even ungodly.... Let me explain why I choose to call such practices ungodly. Science has discovered ways to better acquire certain things belonging to the material world, such as food, clothing, money, or good health, by suitably applying laws applicable to this world. The more knowledge we acquire in these matters, the more successful we shall be in this enterprise. You may have gathered that, at first, attempts to dig a canal through the slim waistline of the Americas failed due to the outbreak of malaria. But, thereafter, with the help of scientific knowledge, malaria has been completely eradicated from the region. This is not due to some changes in planetary positions but the proper application of intelligence that is God's gift to us. In this country, we tend to distrust this God-given intelligence and instead rely on some planetary influences over which we really have no control. Not surprisingly, malaria in this country shows no signs of abating. If you were to ever visit Western continents, you will be surprised to note the great mental and physical strength that the people of those continents carry. This is because they have fulfilled all their material want by applying their mind and intelligence. They have secured a victory over those who rely on the movement of planets. They have driven out smallpox and other diseases that can acquire epidemic proportions. It is true that they have not yet found a cure for cancer or tuberculosis, and yet it is their belief that some day they will accomplish that too. In the meantime, we do not rest content with watching planetary movements; there is the goddess of smallpox (Shitala) to take care of and Olabibi[2] and a host of other divinities that I have not even heard of! We will give up neither the benediction of the goddess Shitala nor medical advice from the doctor. For some favour that we are anxious to procure in our workplace, we will try to propitiate heavenly planets but also try to please the head clerk at the office....

[2] The goddess said to cure cholera.

This was but the crude material side to our existence. There is, however, another side to man that is entirely his own and is spiritual in nature. Here there are the categories of pap and punya, religious virtue and sinfulness. We call such acts or thoughts sinful which adversely affects the relationship between the human self and the Universal Self. The vices of lust (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), and infatuation (*moha*) keep us deeply enmeshed in our ego. It is thus that the human soul fails to realize itself in all others. Just as in the material world, we work our way forward by yoking our intelligence to the Powers of the Divine and by applying laws of the material world, similarly, our souls find their sublimation through the qualities of compassion, brotherhood, and the spirit of pure service. At that stage, our petty interests turn into some higher objective and we begin to find our own welfare in the welfare of all....

When you insist that true Hinduism privileges custom over rational thought, acquired habits over intelligence, planetary interventions over human initiative, it causes me great anguish, not just for your sake but for the sake of this senile, mindless, and bewitched country of ours....

16.
EMOTIVE QUALITIES IN RELIGION*

... In India, the social organization of the Dravidians is matriarchal[1] in nature. In other words, such societies are ruled by women. The main reason for this is the highly emotional nature that people in such societies possess. Their minds are perennially soaked in emotions and they believe arousing and giving expression to such emotions to be their prime objective in religious life. They use their gods to intensify such feelings in themselves and are led to believe that using emotional frenzy to remain oblivious about commonplace occurrences in this world is true religiosity. Whatever lies outside such beliefs is easily discarded....

This is certainly self-centredness, if not selfishness. The people of Bengal are mostly Dravidian in origin and hence the propensity for such emotional self-expression. Bengalis are extremely womanly in their nature and if this flow of high emotion does not cease, our people might soon reach a state of emotional desperation but they will simply stop being creative.... To me, such displays of highly charged emotion appear quite distasteful. In our men, this would seem extremely undignified and for the country as a whole, such effeminacy is, no doubt, a sign of some endemic weakness. In India, there are ascetics and holy men who are either

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 12 Sravan 1339 BS/28 July 1932; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 158–60.

[1] A matriarchal society would be where females, especially the mother, would have control of resources and enjoy moral and political authority. Anthropologists do not consider any society to be unambiguously matriarchal.

like the aridity of a desert or else drenched in emotion from head to foot. And I have to say that people who follow either of these will be lost to God Himself. Why, then, were they born as men? I say, let us keep aside devotion and ceremonial worship. Instead, let us gain the pleasure of God by serving man....

17.

WHAT IS PARAMARTHA?*

... From what little I know of the term paramartha, I can say that it goes beyond self-interest and social conventions. Those who seek this in their lives are not motivated by self-interest, nor do they always adhere to any established rules of social conduct. Such people do not hate or humiliate men, nor forsake them as 'untouchables'. Their spiritual life is not enclosed in synthetically constructed walls; they fraternize with all men without the slightest hesitation....

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, Santiniketan, 8 August 1932; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 160–3. 'Paramartha' literally means the Supreme Truth.

For you, however, paramartha has to do with taboos of food and drink, of questions of caste-ranking that divide the Brahmin from the Shudra. The Hinduism of which you speak does not offer a single definition of the term paramartha that will not falter and fall at the gates of Jorasanko.[1] I have known such sadhakas (spiritual practitioners) who lived at our Jorasanko house and gained the highest spiritual states without ever adhering to the ritual or customary practices prescribed by our scriptures. If we go back to the early India of forest sages we find that they had not the slightest scruples regarding food or drink. If despite that they attained high spiritual life, why can't this be possible now? ...

In this world, there are many other countries besides India. I take it that those gods whom we have entrusted to the care of the Brahman pundits of Bhatpara[2] is the same God who created the other countries. Such countries have had their own devotees and spiritual figures and who are of higher spiritual stature than our Smritiratnas.[3] Today, if any of these holy men from the West came calling, you would probably hasten to purify your home with liberal quantities of Ganga water and cow dung. But do not, for that reason, begin to boast that you are purer in person than they are. Only if we were to recall the instances of *mlechhas*[4] whose life and work have made this world a holier place, our spiritual journey would be facilitated. There can be no doubt that as a person I remain impure but that is not because I do not conform to prescribed ritual conduct but because my mind is not yet freed of sin.

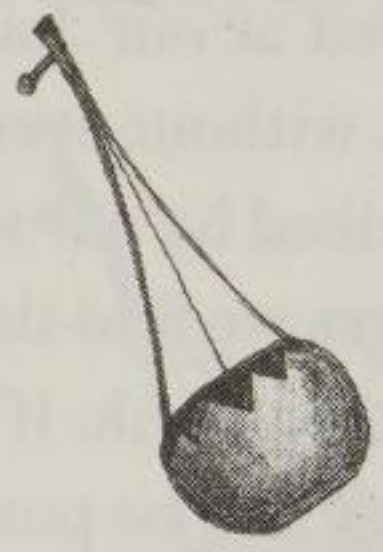
[1] The place in central Calcutta where the Tagore family residence was built.

[2] A Brahmin settlement in district Hooghly, West Bengal, famed for traditional Hindu scholarship.

[3] Esteemed scholars in Hindu law.

[4] A pejorative word used by orthodox Hindus for non-Hindus, especially of foreign origin. Quite significantly, it is not used for Buddhists or Jains, notwithstanding their social and doctrinal differences with Hindus.

I will remain impure even if I were to bathe in the Ganga twice a day and strictly follow taboos of food and drink. And yet, I have reason to believe that God has not forsaken me and perhaps man too will not be sufficiently inhuman to do so....



18.

THE CRISIS PRESENTLY AFFECTING THE HINDUS*

... Whenever I become agitated at the present state of this country, I fail to hold myself back. Here, the religious and customary practices of the Hindus have kept them divided as a community. It is because of this reason that we have suffered successive defeats at the hands of foreign conquerors. Having been repeatedly assaulted by enemies within this country and outside, we are, in the present times, extremely frail and fragile in body. Muslims, on the other hand, share a common religion and customs. The Muslims of Bengal, Madras, and the Punjab, and even those residing outside India, are united as a community. In times of

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, dated 16 October 1933; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 216–18.

crisis, they come to one another's rescue; the vastly fragmented Hindus cannot possibly compete with them. It looks as though we are about to be once again humbled by the Pathans.

P.C. Ray[1] continues to cry out in wilderness, telling us how the livelihood of Bengalis is being taken away by others. However, Bengali Muslims, I have to say, are an exception; I have found them scattered all across the world, seriously trying to seek out a livelihood. This has been made possible by the fact that unlike Hindus, they are not subjected to the tyranny of blind custom. How will the Hindu survive, I have often wondered, suffering as they do from inherent weaknesses of body and character and always carrying the burden of numerous 'dos' and 'don'ts'? Today, in order to gain greater social respectability, lower-caste Hindus are embracing Islam and Christianity every other day, and even now our Pundits at Bhatpara have not woken up to this reality. There will come a day when Muslims will force the great grandchildren of the Tarkaratnas[2] to read the kalma[3] and by then there will not even be time to repent....

[1] P.C. Ray (1861–1944), renowned scholar of chemistry and chemical technology in British India, established the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical works in 1901. He funded the Indian Chemical Society and supported Gandhian movements.

[2] Specialist scholars in Nyaya or Hindu Logic.

[3] A covenant (based on the Hadis) by virtue of which a person agrees to accept the fundamental principles of Islam.

19.
ABUSING GOD-GIVEN INTELLIGENCE*

My child, hitherto your mother kept picking up quarrels with me on the subject of religion with untiring enthusiasm. Now that I have fallen silent, she has nothing else to keep her engaged! With your help, she is trying to revive that row! However, this enterprise of hers is bound to fail since I will never pick a quarrel with you. I will remain silent even if there be great differences of opinion between us.

You will be surprised to hear that our religions do not differ at all. I have not accepted initiation under a guru, nor will I accept in the days to come. My God is not cast in some sectarian mould.

Since God is formless, there can be no limits to what forms He can assume; but in this creation of his, what, apart from Him, can assume some form or shape. This form of His is not crafted by some human hand nor limited by some particular time and place.

We only insult our intelligence when accepting customs now in vogue, such as taking a dip in the Ganga at the time of an eclipse. Human intelligence is a gift from God Himself, let us not abuse it. Those who are weighed down by meaningless acts and rituals have minds like stagnant pools which have grown some moss and pose a danger to health. Such people can only keep hanging their heads in shame; even after being repeatedly humiliated for hundreds of years, they remain disunited on account of their many frailties and failures. I entirely agree with you on the question of not killing animals for food. I consider it a crime that I should be even occasionally forced to consume fish and flesh.

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Basanti Devi, 5 November 1933; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 416–19. Basanti Devi (Bagchi) was Hematabala's daughter.

There was a stage in my life when I remained a vegetarian for a long time; even now it is rarely that I have non-vegetarian food.

This letter will prove to you that my religion does not differ from that of yours. This is because we are both mentally young. As with other things, ignorance affects only weak minds. Weakness is the sign of senility.... May this senility never touch you, may your intelligence stay sparklingly clear. May your heart turn more accommodative, your relationship with others more liberal. I bless you that He with whom you shall one day unite, keep you advancing on the road to liberation....

20.

RELIGION AS BASE HUMAN PASSION*

... I have never argued with you but today I must. The Maharani of Vizianagaram[1] offered her respect to me which you have

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 5 Aghrayan 1341 BS/21 November 1934; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 272–4.

[1] Currently a populous city and district in Andhra Pradesh, formerly a princely state. The ancestors of the maharaja of Vizianagaram are believed to have been descended from the Sisodia clan of the Rajputs.

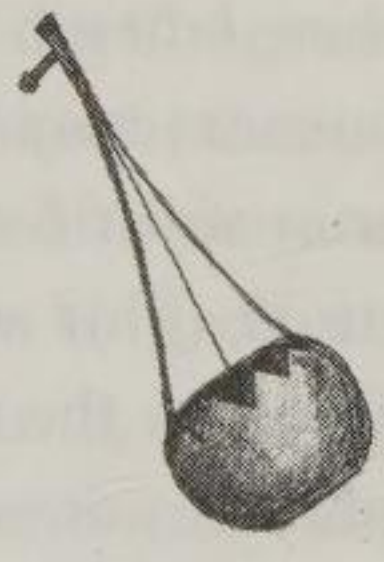
compared to that shown by devotees to pandas in temples. For me, it is important that the difference between the two be clearly spelt out. In showing me respect, there could have been no worldly or other-worldly considerations at work. Perhaps the Maharani found some quality in me that was worth respecting. This could well have been misplaced but showing respect to greatness does not have to rest on a cause: it could be purely spontaneous. Many women, in coveting heaven, organize elaborate ceremonial worship of the gods and conclude that worship by placing huge sums of money at the feet of the panda. If what they do can be called devotion, then the bribe offered to the *daroga*[2] anticipating a satisfactory conclusion to a criminal case also qualifies to be so called. That you can at all call such acts devotional in nature also reflects the present state of our country. It is this that encourages the scholar to argue how, after destroying vast armies on the battleground of Kurukshetra, Krishna had no hesitation to order the sacrifice of thousands of goats and buffaloes.... Now, in a righteous war, the inevitable destruction of life may be carried out without much compunction. But do the slaughtered goats and buffaloes whose blood the goddess drinks belong to the class of wrong doers? And are they really greater wrong-doers than those who slaughter them? In the Mahabharata, a demon known as Bakasura[3] fed on a man each day, and there is reason to believe that in some of our temples dedicated to the goddess, human flesh was once considered the highest offering. Where, then, is the difference between the goddess and the demon? ... The Puranas tell the story of how, at one time, the goddess Chandi killed a demon called Mahisha (the buffalo).[4] If that demon was particularly wicked, then the goddess may be said to have performed a good act. But what wrong did the innocent buffalo do? Do those who

[2] An Indian term for a police inspector.

[3] A demon resembling a crane that the Pandava Bhima killed in combat.

[4] This is narrated in the *Markandeya Purana* (*Devi Mahatmya*).

make a blood offering to the goddess do so because they believe that this will please her? And is this not an insult to the gods? At a pilgrim site called Kankalitala, near Bolpur,[5] many hundreds of goats are sacrificed on a particular day each year and the water bodies in the area turn red with blood. If you are not ashamed to call this barbarism a form of worship, why is the veneration of the panda so despicable an act? Do not cast bhakti in the category of base human passion. In truth, to claim that displaying such bhakti pleases the gods, amounts to belittling bhakti itself. For the true devotee, devotion is an end in itself....



[5] A sakta religious site, few miles off Bolpur (district Birbhum), greatly revered by the local population. An annual fair is still organized here.

21.

FINDING SPIRITUAL MEANING IN THIS WORLD*

... In your religious life, the world around you and the object of your adoration are competing against one another; your

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 19 October 1935; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 316–17.

mind will be never be at peace until you renounce one or the other. My own nature, however, has persuaded me to reconcile the two. When I see beauty in the objects that I behold and seek to realize goodness in myself, this very world turns into heaven. Truth is not divisible; it embraces all. This world is not the creation of the Devil, nor is it something that I have personally created. It is a part of that Truth in which you seek the Transcendent. Spiritual life is affected when a part of that Truth is denied because of blind faith or out of a sense of pure revulsion. Our spiritual life becomes tainted when there begins to appear within it vanity, superstition, or irrational beliefs. This world turns holy when I begin to see in it the Bliss of Divine Presence. Auspiciousness may be found not in water or earth, in some special wear or mystic syllables; it lies within us, for man is by nature spiritual. This was the message of Jesus as also of the Buddha. Krishna in the Gita says the same when he calls sacrifice to be founded not upon external rituals but our inward feelings. Truth reflects this sacrifice as do charity, compassion, and the love of mankind. When in place of Truth, compassion, or a sparklingly pure heart, there is only pompous ceremony and sentimental self-indulgence, there spirituality is a little apart from self-deception. Do not doubt this world, do not hate it. He has not compromised His own Truth by creating a heaven apart from earth. Find happiness in everything; take it upon yourself to spread happiness among all. This alone will bring you salvation....

22.

IS THE CONGRESS TRULY SLIGHTING THE SANATANISTS?*

... I do not quite understand the allegation that you bring against the Congress. I have no reason to believe that the Congress shows empathy and concern for every religious group but the sanatanists. The sole objective before the Congress is political work; religious and social issues do not concern them. If that were not so, it would not have equally admitted Sikhs and Muslims. The Congress leadership is actually keen to grow stronger by uniting all communities. On the other hand, the religion of the sanatanists has permanently divided Indian society. Hence, those desiring political success are unlikely to take an interest in the opinion and customs of sanatanists. All the same, never before have I heard someone allege that sanatanists have been deliberately kept out of Congress activities. In the entire world, it is only in India that worship has been made to rest on divisions of caste. In other words, this is an issue over which the Hindus cannot come together even if people otherwise hostile to one another can. For this, the Hindus have been humiliated and defeated at every step....

That Bengal today has a larger body of Muslims is on account of sanatanists. When I was on my round of our family estates, I could gather ample evidence of this. The Hindus have antagonized people by humiliating them and it is quite shameful that this was done in the name of religion. The sanatanists are anti-national because they are opposed to Eternal Religion. They have once been overpowered by Muslims and, in all likelihood, this will happen

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 28 December 1935; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 321–3.

again. The Muslims may suffer from many vices but they have not divided God; their unity is based on shared religious tenets. With the Hindus, religion is the cause behind all difference and disunity. It is through fissures in our social body that our strength and vitality have been consistently drained out over several centuries....

The Congress has not been able to summon enough courage to take up the cause of our ill fortune; perhaps the Mahatma and a few others have done this personally. This cowardice, on the part of the Congress, runs counter to its duty but even so I failed to understand why you have lodged a complaint on behalf of the sanatanists against the Congress....

23.

SPIRITUAL LIFE FINDS ITS OWN TERMS OF REFERENCE*

... I was happy to go through your letter. Religion is self-established to the extent that it deals with pure spirituality. That part of religion which comprises the more gross aspects will always have to stand the tests of history and science. Science has no hold on

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Hemantabala Devi, 8 Pous 1344 BS/23 December 1937; reproduced in *Chithipotro*, vol. 9, pp. 395–6.

the Christ who is the Christ of the devotee, the Christ who revels in spiritual glory. Even when men discuss threadbare the details of his birth as recorded at Jerusalem, this does not amount to belittling the spiritual Christ. The same may be said of the Buddha; the Buddha is worshipped not because his life was somehow supernatural but because of the extraordinary strength and luminosity of character. In the Bhagavad Gita, the sermon of Krishna is glorious and even if history were to say that he died at the hands of a hunter, it does not really matter. Spirituality lies embedded in the soul, not the physical body. Only because science refuses to grant that Christ walked across water, the devotion in a devotee of Christ ought not to suffer. If it does, then it would have to be called childish. In recent times, the followers of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa have taken him to be an incarnation of God but this does not in itself require us to ascribe supernatural qualities to his birth, death, and everyday life. In the name of science, I may scornfully dismiss the idea that the Creator; out of deference to the wishes of a devotee or to rescue him from some trouble, has extended daylight from 12 hours to 16 but I cannot dismiss God Himself. Such devotion that has to be aroused through crude and childish methods really have no value. To acknowledge science in its own domain does not amount to slighting devotion, for God manifests Himself in science too. Even an omnipotent God cannot dispute His own creation just as it is beyond His powers to end His own life. To acknowledge science and history in their respective domains is a part of accepting Him. Anti-science is atheism because God's own creation is founded on science. It is science that His Divine Play shines through, not through the crude beliefs of some simpleton....

24.
ETHICAL ACTIVISM IN RELIGION*

... I am not qualified to preach in the manner of a guru; I advise you only as a well-wisher that each day you must carry out an act that is dedicated to Him. In performing this act, you must not claim fame or anything else in return and which you must also selflessly accomplish.... If there is even a single act that you can wilfully perform without being compelled in some way, without coveting the results thereof but surrendering these to God, then, through that act you will have completed your worship and achieved self-fulfilment. For God, there are no distinctions of big

or small; he goes only by the sincerity of feeling, not the person in whom it originates. You should aim to carry out only that which is commensurate with your personality and your capability. That form of adoration of God is best that is performed through human activism....

* *Source*: Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Kadimbini Dutta, n.d.; reproduced in *Chithipotro* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960), vol. 7, pp. 1–3.

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'I cannot,
with any clarity or
definitiveness, claim to
comprehend what religion means
to me. It is not something that is
prescriptive, nor written down in the
form of some philosophical discourse.
Once detached from everyday life, it is
quite impossible for me to understand
this religion.'

—Translated from
Rabindranath Tagore's
***Atmaparichay* (1917)**

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